

三三〇五年の夏休み〈下〉

# メグとゼロンII

時雨沢恵一

KEIICHI SIGSAWA

イラスト…黒星紅白

ILLUSTRATION : KOUHAKU KUROBOSHI



 電撃文庫

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ナタリア・スタインベック（ナシー、またはナーク）

三一九〇年、第六の月八日生まれの十五歳。上級学校三年生。  
有名音楽家の両親を持つ。  
オペラ・スタジオ所属で、楽器演奏が得意。



セロ・マクスウェル

三一九〇年、第三の月三日生まれの十五歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
ロクシ・マクスウェル（ロクシ）の  
首都特別地域にある第四上級学校生徒。  
実家が遠いために寮住まい。部活は未所属。

ラリー・ハップバーン

三一九〇年、  
第五の月十一日生まれの十五歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
歴史ある軍人の家系に生まれ、  
自らも軍人を目指し鍛錬中。  
セロンの大親友。



シュトラウスキー・メグミカ（メク）

三七八九年、第二の月十四日生まれの十六歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
ベセルノルト王国連合スーペーイル出身で、  
シュトラウスキーが名字。  
ロクシへの引越と転校で、学年遅れている。  
コーラス部所属。

ジェニー・ジョーンズ

三一九〇年、  
第四の月十七日生まれの十五歳。  
上級学校三年生。  
ロクシと「二」を争う大富豪の  
家の生まれ。新聞部の部長。



ニコラス・ブラウニング（ニラク）

三一九〇年、第四の月四日生まれの十五歳。上級学校三年生。  
中性的な容姿の持ち主。部活は未所属。  
セロとは顔見知り。



**Seron Maxwell**

Born on the 3rd day of the third month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student at the 4th Capital Secondary School in the Capital District of the Roxcheanuk Confederation. His hometown is far from school, so he lives in the dorms. Seron is not a part of any school clubs.

**Strauski Megmica**

Born on the 14th day of the second month of the year 3289. 16 years old. A third-year student. She is from the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa. 'Strauski' is her family name. Because she started school a year after moving to Roxche, she is a year older than her classmates. Megmica is a member of the chorus club.

**Larry Hepburn**

Born on the 12th day of the fifth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. He is from military family with a very long history, and trains daily to become a soldier himself. Larry is Seron's best friend.

**Natalia Steinbeck**

Born on the 8th day of the sixth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. Her parents are famous musicians. Natalia is part of the orchestra club, and is skilled with musical instruments.

**Nicholas Browning**

Born on the 4th day of the fourth month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. He has an androgynous appearance and is not part of any clubs. Nicholas and Seron are previously acquainted.

**Jenny Jones**

Born on the 17th day of the first month of the year 3290. 15 years old. A third-year student. She is the daughter of one of the richest people in Roxche. Jenny is the president of the newspaper club.





# メグとセロン

## II

三三〇五年の夏休み〈下〉

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## **Chapter 9: The Basement**

“All right. No one’s around, and no one’s watching. It’s going well so far,” said Larry.

“Is anyone here? Please answer if you can hear me!” Seron yelled into the window, crouching down. “We need to tell you something very important. Please, can you hear me?”

Seron repeated himself multiple times, making sure to state that the windows were set to be blocked and that it would be best if the man were to come outside.

He then waited, straining his ears.

But there was no response.

“Should we try the west side? That’s where he was in the picture,” Larry asked.

“No, let’s not. It’ll be the same no matter where we yell from,” Seron replied, getting up and turning to Larry. He met his gaze. “It’s all up to you now.”

“All right. Leave it to me.”

Larry pulled off his backpack and went up the stone steps to the doors.

“You think he can do it?” Natalia wondered. “If this doesn’t work, we’re outta options.”

“We must simply believe in Larry. And if he should fail, we will think of something else. Perhaps going to watch a film is still a viable option?” Nicholas wondered.

“Please...we are asking you, Larry. We want to help the man...” Meg pleaded.

“Good luck, blondie. I’ll let this one slide without any incriminating photographs.” Jenny nodded.

“Tch...”

Larry got down on one knee before the doors.

He took out Natalia’s hairpin from his pocket. It had been snapped in two and the ends filed into points. Seron stood beside him.

“All right. Time for the Confederation military’s secret technique...” Larry joked, pushing the two pieces into the lock. He held one in place in the direction the lock turned, and pushed the other piece down along the grooves as he moved it back and forth.

Several seconds later.

There was a click.

“I got it.”

The open lock was in Larry’s hand.

“Not bad, Larry!”

“I suppose we can save the film for another time. The theater will wait for us.”

“Incredible, Larry! It is very incredible!”

“Hm. You’re more useful than I gave you credit for.”

The others commented, one after another.

“Great work, Larry,” Seron added.

“I’m only doing this ‘cause it’s an emergency.”

Slowly, Seron and Larry unwrapped the heavy, rusted chains. They heaved open the squeaky double doors. And, afraid that someone might jump out from behind, Seron and Larry quickly took defensive stances.

But all that escaped the storehouse was a damp, cold breeze.

Seron and Larry went back down the stairs and returned to the group.



“That was great, Larry. Give me lessons sometime—if all else fails, I’ll just go into a life of crime.”

“I’ll have to refuse, Lia,” Larry said, shouldering his backpack again.

“All right. We’ll be back soon,” Seron said.

“What?” “Pardon?” “Hm?” “Hey!” Natalia, Meg, Nick, and Jenny responded at once.

“Hold on a moment, Seron. Do you intend to leave us behind?” asked Nick. Seron nodded.

“The two of us are more than enough. It’s too dangerous for all of us to go when we have no idea what’s really down there. This was how we planned the mission in the first place.”

“That’s news to me, Seron. You’re taking us with you,” Natalia said with a glare.

“Yeah! We didn’t come all this way just to sit back and wait,” Jenny agreed, holding up the camera bag she had slung over her shoulder.

“If it is possible at all, I would like to go together as well. Is it not possible, Seron?” Meg pleaded.

“Huh? Er...I...I didn’t think you’d all *want* to come along,” Seron explained awkwardly.

Natalia sighed. “I thought it was pretty obvious we’d all go together, considering how the conversation was going. For being smart and handsome, you’re a pretty dense guy.”

“We don’t know who might be down there. It’s too dangerous—”

“Which is why you’re not gonna go in there without us. The more eyes and ears, the better, right? Though my eyes aren’t gonna be much help.” Natalia said, pushing up her glasses.

Seron did not seem convinced. “I was hoping you guys would keep an eye out in case someone approached the storehouse.”

“And what if someone does? Then we all get in trouble. Or did you want us to run off? If whoever comes here decides to go, ‘Oh, somebody left the door open’ and locks it right back up, we’re done. Larry’s the only one who can open it. So it makes no difference whether we stay or go with you. And if things go wrong, we can always muscle open one of the windows from the inside,” Natalia argued.

Next to her stood Meg, looking at Seron like a puppy begging to go on a walk. Seron fell silent.

“We *do* have enough gloves and flashlights for everyone,” Larry remarked.

Seron thought for a moment. Then he reached a conclusion.

“...Stay right behind us and don’t wander off.”

“Sweet.”

“Then we will go too!”

“I suppose we are.”

“Of course we’re going along!”

Larry whispered to Seron as the others celebrated, “Going on an adventure with the girl of your dreams in a dark basement, eh? It’s a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity!”

Seron whispered back, “I don’t even know what I’m trying to do anymore...”

“What? We’re going in there to rescue someone.”

“...Yeah. Let’s go with that.”

Natalia cut in. “Hey, you two! Stop leaving us out of the conversation!”

Everyone had a pair of gloves and a flashlight.

“We’re good to go. Let’s get started, Seron.”

“Yeah...”

The group started towards the building with Larry and Seron in the lead. After a short climb up the steps, they entered the cool interior.

The girls followed right behind Larry and Seron, and Nick brought up the rear. They left the door wide open as though daring a teacher to see.

The storehouse interior was symmetrical in design. The large rectangular building was divided in four by two intersecting hallways with high ceilings.

Next to the halls were rooms with wooden walls, but the ceilings were lower in the rooms. The rooms were not furnished.

It was cool and humid inside. The air stank faintly of rusted iron.

The group stood in the middle of the building, examining the interior with fascination. It was quite bright inside thanks to the windows on the roof and near the ceiling. No one had to turn on their flashlight.

There was a thin layer of dust in the halls, but it was otherwise clean—someone must have been regularly cleaning the storehouse. The stone floors were slightly sunken in the parts that were most trodden on, speaking for the three centuries’ worth of history that the building represented.

“Hm... I don’t see anything that looks like a basement entrance,” Larry said.

They could not find any stairs or steps leading down. None of the halls led to any other levels.

“Then maybe there’s an entrance in one of the rooms,” said Seron.

“Should we split up?” asked Larry.

“No, we’ll stick together,” Seron replied, “We’ll check the rooms in order, starting from the ones on the east.” He began walking cautiously down the long hallway.

The moment Larry made to follow, Natalia whispered to him, “Countin’ on you.”

“Yeah.”

Natalia walked protectively next to Meg, as though escorting her. Jenny took out her camera and put the strap around her neck, looking around as she snapped the occasional photo. Nick followed behind her.

Seron and Larry stopped at the nearest door. Larry grabbed the handle and cautiously opened it, slowly peering inside.

The room was about 4 square meters in size.

Like in the hallway, the floor was made of stone here as well. Heaped on the floor was a pile of old timber bent from humidity. There was nothing—and no one—else.

The room across the hall was full of roof tiles. The dark dust made clear their age. Some of the tiles were cracked around the edges.

They finished checking all the rooms on the east.

“Nothing.”

“Yeah.”

They could not find anything resembling any staircases. The only things in the rooms were construction materials from an unknown time.



“It looks like they’re not going to be using those. They probably left the materials here because it’s too much work to move them out,” said Seron.

“The teachers must’ve personally done repair work back in the old days—the *really* old days. Nowadays you can just call a company to do that work for you, and they even bring their own materials,” Larry added.

“Next?” Natalia urged them. Seron turned west. The group went back down the hall to examine the other rooms.

The two in the lead braced themselves for anything to pop out at them at any point as they continued to search.

They began with the doors near the middle, but all they found were rooms full of rusted metal scaffolds, coils of metal wire, and old materials that would never see use.

“Just two rooms left,” Larry said. They had yet to explore the two rooms on the western edge of the building. In terms of location, the window featured in the photograph was just underneath the last two rooms.

Larry slowly opened the door to the room on the northwestern corner and peered inside. And,

“Hm...is this the place, you think?” he asked, gesturing Seron over.

Larry was crouching low by the door. Seron peered inside from just above his head and scanned the room.

It was different from the others.

There were no construction materials to be found. Instead the group found a large brown rug, which covered most of the floor. Atop the carpet stood an old wooden desk.

Seron instructed the others to wait and entered the room alongside Larry.

Silently, they exchanged glances. They each picked up either end of the desk and slowly carried it out into the hallway.

All that was left was the rug. Seron and Larry stepped back inside and began to slowly—ever so slowly—roll it up.

The others watched from the hallway.

And,

“This is it.”

“Yeah...”

Under the rug, between the stone flooring, they found a wooden trapdoor.

The trapdoor was about 1 square meter in size and was at nearly the same level as the floor. It emerged fully as Seron and Larry completely rolled up the rug.

“Should I open this, Seron?”

“Please.”

Larry took hold of the handle. He pulled on it, and the trapdoor opened easily. From the gap they could hear the sound of wind passing through the barred windows.

The gap widened as Larry heaved open the door, and eventually became a 1-meter-square hole.

Seron and Larry pulled back the door, letting it down on the rolled-up rug. And they slightly adjusted its position so it would not close on its own.

“Is anyone in there?” Seron yelled into the opening.



His voice was sucked into the darkness. All he heard was an echo of himself. There was no answer.

Seron pointed his flashlight into the hole.

A steel ladder was securely affixed to the stone foundation. It was about 2.5 meters in length, and touched the bottom of the basement.

There was nothing in his line of sight, save for the floor and the ladder.

Seron called out into the basement once more, and turned.

“All right. Come over here, everyone,” he said to the others in the hallway.

Meg, Natalia, Jenny, and Nick entered the room, curious. And soon, all six students were squatting around the trapdoor, staring inside.

“Hm. So now we know somebody’s going in and out of this place. We’re getting more and more clues as we go,” Natalia said.

“So this is the entrance to our secret labyrinth, I suppose,” Nick commented.

“Whoever’s inside, come out here where it’s bright. I’ll snap a really nice photo of you.” Jenny grinned.

And finally,

“We must save him as fast as possible! It is very bad for his health if he stays always in a place like this!” Meg cried.

“So we’re really going in together?” Seron asked one last time.

“Why’d you have to be so stubborn? We’re all ready to go.” Natalia sighed.

All six of them were wearing green work gloves and holding flashlights. They checked the flashlights several times over to make sure they worked.

“...Let’s go. Make sure to stick together—it would be terrible if someone got lost,” Seron said.

“I’ll take the lead,” Larry volunteered, putting down his backpack and climbing into the trapdoor first. He put his feet on the ladder and cautiously put his weight on his feet, making sure that the rungs were strong enough to support him. Then he slowly climbed down to the floor, which was lit by Seron and Natalia’s lights.

And even as Larry climbed down the ladder,

“Is anyone in there? We’re coming inside!”

Seron continued to call out into the basement.

Eventually, as Seron and Natalia watched, Larry safely made it to the basement floor. He turned on his own flashlight.

From above, Seron and Natalia saw Larry look around with his flashlight. The light circled the area once and stopped.

“What’s it like down there?” asked Seron.

“It’s empty. It’s an empty room made of stone. And it’s pretty big, too. About half the building upstairs, I’d wager. But there’s no one and nothing here,” Larry said curiously, his voice resonating slightly.

“Here.”

Seron left his things to Natalia and climbed down the ladder.

Cautiously following Larry down to the basement, Seron also turned on his flashlight and scanned his surroundings.

The basement's walls, ceiling, and floor was all made of stone.

The ceiling was a little lower than on the ground floor. It was cooler in the basement than aboveground, but thanks to the barred windows the air was not very humid.

The windows also let enough light into the basement. By the time his eyes were adjusted to the darkness, Seron only had to use his flashlight to examine the minutest of details.

Before his eyes were stone walls, the floor, and the ceiling. It was like he was standing in an empty box.

And just as Larry had said, the room was large.

It was square in shape, almost 10 square meters wide. It was about half the size of the building aboveground. On the eastern side was a doorway leading into the next room.

Seron turned to Larry. "It really is completely empty in here. The walls around the doorway probably serve as supports."

"Should we check out the other side, while we're at it?"

"Sure. Nat won't like it, but let's do this."

Seron and Larry walked through the basement with flashlights in hand.

"Hey! Guys!" Natalia cried from aboveground, but they ignored her.

"Is anybody here?" "Anyone?" Seron and Larry called out loudly as they headed for the doorway leading into the next room.

They stopped at the doorway and exchanged glances. Then,

"Are you in there?" "Excuse us!"

They pointed their flashlights into the room in unison and stepped through.

And they went quiet.

There was nothing there.

"This doesn't make sense..."

"No, it doesn't."

Larry and Seron furrowed their brows as they headed back to the trapdoor.

"Hey! Don't wander off without us!" Natalia yelled from upstairs, her bangs falling forward. Seron responded.

"Oh, feel free to climb down now, Nat."

"Hm? What's down there?"

"Nothing. And no one."

"All right. Thanks for the permission, your majesty."

Natalia climbed down first with Larry's backpack on one arm. The moment she stepped onto the floor, she held out the backpack towards him.

"Here."

"Oh. You didn't have to lug it all the way here."

"Forget it. Take it already."

Meg carefully, cautiously descended the ladder next under Natalia's watchful gaze.

She was followed by Jenny, who climbed down with ease. Nick was last.

"So now we're all down here," Larry grumbled.

“Problem, Larry? Anyway, did you find anything?” said Natalia. Her voice resounded slightly.

With four people’s gazes on him, Seron repeated himself. “There’s nothing here.”

“Seriously?”

“It’s kind of weird for me to say this, since I was against everyone coming along. But I think it’ll be faster for you to take a look yourselves.”

Led by Seron, the four latecomers began to look around the basement.

And they were done in a matter of seconds.

“It’s certainly a very tidy place,” Nick noted. It was hard to tell if he was being sarcastic.

“Much cleaner than my room,” Larry added.

Seron narrowed his eyes at the exchange.

Jenny went over to the window on the west side—where she had captured the mysterious face on camera.

“Over here! He would have been standing right here! I just know it!” she cried, jumping up and down.

“There is nothing here, and there is no one here. What in the world happened? Why?” Meg wondered. But no one could answer her questions.

Larry put down his backpack and looked at Seron. “Hey. I know this isn’t the best time to say this, but...”

Everyone turned to Larry when they heard his voice trail off. Larry seemed to feel even more self-conscious. “Maybe...maybe that picture was a trick of the light after all?”

“What the heck, blondie!” Jenny exploded.

“I’m just suggesting a possibility,” Larry replied.

“Impossible.” Seron shook his head.

“Huh? Why?”

“If it really was a trick of the light, our culprit wouldn’t have stolen the film.”

“You’re right.”

“And if there really isn’t anyone in this basement, something’s not right.”

Larry furrowed his brow.

“What does this mean, Seron?” Meg wondered, also confused.

“It’s too tidy in here.”

“Huh.” Larry nodded.

“Hm. You’re right.” “Indeed,” Jenny and Nick said almost in unison. Natalia nodded again and again,

“Hm?” Meg still did not understand. Natalia explained.

“The basement’s too clean for a place no one uses, don’t you think? With these windows, you’d expect to see some garbage, leaves, or dirt piled up around here.”

“Ah, now that you say it, I see. It is very strange.”

“It wouldn’t be surprising to see the place infested with bugs,” Larry added.

“Thankfully not,” said Natalia. “In other words—”

“Someone is cleaning this place regularly,” Nick finished.

“So there really is a mystery person in here?” Larry wondered, looking around with the flashlight again. “Then where could he be?”

“Perhaps he does not reside here permanently? Suppose he simply comes in and out of this building sometimes, and happened to be caught on camera yesterday. Perhaps he placed the rug and the desk over the trapdoor to hide the entrance after he left.”

“Not likely,” Jenny said immediately.

Natalia agreed. “Yeah. Other places, sure. But this here’s a school building.”

Everyone nodded.

“I get it. Entry to a school campus is almost as strict as a military base. Someone would call the police on him in no time if he really kept going in and out of here. The security guards’ll be on him in a flash with their shotguns and rubber bullets,” said Larry.

“Then there’s only one other possibility,” Seron said.

All eyes were on him.

“There’s more here.”

“Huh?”

“Wha?”

“Seriously?”

“Pardon?”

“Hm?”

Five voices expressed their disbelief. Natalia quickly spoke for everyone.

“What’re you talking about? You know Seron, sometimes you think so fast it’s impossible to figure out what you’re saying.”

Seron lightly shook his head. “...Sorry. I mean that there’s more to this basement than we see here. There should be another passageway. I’m assuming there must be at least one other door that leads somewhere else.”

“I see. That makes sense.” Natalia nodded.

“I’d love to say the same, but where would we find a passageway? You really think there’s a door someplace in this basement, Seron?” Larry asked, casting light on the walls. Seron nodded.

“Yeah. This building was put up 300 years ago, and the basement is still preserved. This area used to be the center of an old village, which means that there must have been other buildings around this one.”

“Speaking as a history-lover, I suppose that’s quite reasonable. I seem to recall hearing that basements and underground passageways were a mainstay of medieval architecture in the East,” Nick commented.

Larry turned to Seron for confirmation. Seron nodded. “Settlements were usually built on exposed bedrock.”

Nick decided to chime in, explaining further. “Before the Middle Ages, settlements were mostly founded near suitable farmland. But architectural techniques grew more and more advanced, and by the Middle Ages it was possible to build structures larger than ever before. These large buildings, of course, needed a solid foundation to prevent them from sinking. That was how exposed bedrock became the norm for settlements. The availability of material and the extra space offered by basements meant that underground floors became quite common. Some built massive structures in a show of opulence, and others expanded and renovated existing buildings to connect them in complex networks. And supposedly, many such basements were



equipped with secret passages often used for illicit purposes such as making secret deals or hiding a cache of valuables. You can often find secret basements as a plot device in period novels.”

“I get it. So it wouldn’t be surprising to find a secret passageway in here,” Jenny concluded.

“Thanks for the info. Mind sharing some of that knowledge next time we have to take a test together?” Natalia joked.

“Then, you are saying that this basement has a door to a secret road, and it is not strange that this basement is connected to a next basement? You are saying that the man is running away from us there?” Meg asked Seron.

Seron nodded. “Yeah. So let’s all take a closer look at the walls in this room. There must be a passage somewhere.”

“It won’t be easy,” Nick warned. “If we wish to find the secret passage, we will likely have to physically push the door open. It will take a very long time for us to find that specific part of the wall.”

“Yeah... I wish there was an easier way, but...” Seron trailed off.

“Then I guess it’s my turn,” Natalia said, pushing up her glasses and stepping forward.

## **Chapter 10: Sounds**

“What’re you going to do, Lia?” Larry asked as he watched Natalia confidently step forward.

Meg tilted her head, and Nick and Seron watched in silence.

“Just leave this to me. It’s my turn to take the spotlight.”

“Hey...don’t tell me you’re gonna play music to find the passage?” Larry squawked, dead serious. Natalia burst into laughter.

“Pffft! Hahah! Close, but no cigar. Does anyone have anything big and solid? Check your backpack, Larry. I need something like a club.”

“Huh? I have a folding spade, if that works for you.”

“Sure. Hand it over.”

“Okay.”

Confused, Larry pulled out a military-use folding spade from one of the backpack pockets. It was mid-sized with a green wooden shaft, and a foldable black metallic head.

Larry expertly unfolded and secured the spade open. Then he handed it to Natalia by the shaft. “Here.”

“Thanks. Now where do I start? I think Seron’s on to what I’m trying to do.”

“Yeah.” Seron nodded.

“Oh! I think that I am on to what this is too!” Meg said brightly, raising her hand.

Larry and Nick seemed to be in the dark still. Seron answered Natalia’s question. “You can leave the north side for the end. The campus wall’s right there, and beyond that’s an apartment building. And I think we can save the eastern and western sides for later, since there’s not as much space in those directions. As long as there aren’t any more basements around here, anyway. Please start with the south.”

“All right. Everybody stay quiet. No footsteps, you hear?”

“What are you—”

“Shaddap and let me do my thing.” Natalia cut Larry off, and headed for the south wall with a spade in hand instead of a violin.

Seron followed at a slight distance as though to guard her.

The others thought for a moment before going after Natalia and Seron. Natalia stopped a little before the wall. The others stopped about 3 meters behind her and Seron.

“All righty.”

Holding the spade by the shaft, Natalia raised the blade to neck-level and pointed it at the wall.

“Percussion’s fine by me.”

She struck the wall with the end of the spade.

*Clang.* A dull, heavy sound resounded through the basement and faded.

“Hm.”

Natalia repeated the action with the wall above and under the first spot. The shovel made the same sound.

“Mhm.”

Then, Natalia took a big step to the left.

Standing about 1 meter from her original place, she again struck the center of the wall, and then above and below the spot.

Then she took another step to the left and repeated the process.

Of the others, Jenny and Nick realized what Natalia was doing the moment she struck the wall.

“C’mon, guys. Give me a hint—” Larry began, but Jenny and Nick held up their fingers to silence him.

Twelve heavy impacts later, Natalia took yet another step to the left. And she struck the wall again.

She struck the same place for the second time. Then she struck the space below that. The impact sounded the same as the others.

“Something’s fishy about this spot,” she said, turning with a smile.

“You can figure that out with just the sound, Lia?” Larry gasped, having finally understood.

Natalia responded as nonchalantly as though she were rattling off what she had eaten for breakfast, “Yeah. This spot right here and the space under it sound totally different.”

“I can’t tell. What about you, Seron?”

Seron shook his head. “It all sounded the same to me.”

“I did not know the different sound. I did my best, but...”

“Nor did I. Hats off to you, Natalia.”

“Yeah. I didn’t hear a difference.”

Meg, Nick, and Jenny admitted in turn.

“I see. So I’m not just dense, then,” Larry mumbled.

“It was a subtle reverberation. Anyway, I’m pretty sure there’s some empty space behind here, but no guarantees. It’s your turn, musclehead.”

Natalia stepped away from the wall with the spade in hand. Seron approached the wall. Larry gave Natalia a curious look as he passed her by and joined Seron.

Seron cast light on the wall. He and Larry carefully scrutinized every detail.

They examined the wall for some time, but they could not find any difference in this section.

“You really think it’s here, Seron?”

“It’s worth a shot. Let’s give this spot a push. Don’t go all-in from the start, though. Start off gentle so you don’t accidentally jam your hands in the passage.”

“Right.”

Seron put his hands on the middle level of the wall, where Natalia had pointed, and Larry crouched down to put his hands on the lower part of the wall.

“All right. One, two, three!”

The moment they pushed, something squeaked.

“Hm?”

“Whoa!”

The wall moved with surprising ease. The section they had been pushing against sunk several centimeters into the wall.

Seron and Larry stepped back and cast light on the wall. Part of the wall was sunken, from the floor to about Seron's waist-level.

Larry continued to push alone, and the hidden door sunk in further.

Larry's eyes widened even as he pushed the door open.

"I don't believe it..."

"I expected nothing less from you, Nat. Larry, let's keep this up."

"Yeah."

Seron and Larry resumed pushing together. The door finally came to a stop once it had moved about 40 centimeters.

Once Seron was sure that the door was firmly open, he turned to Larry. "I think we'll have to push the door sideways now. Can you give it a shot?"

"I'm on it."

Larry waited for Seron to move out of the way and stuck his fingers into the gap on the right side of the door. He pulled.

The narrow slab of stone moved sideways with annoying ease like a smooth sliding door.

"Whoa. This is really well-made." Larry exclaimed as he pulled the door all the way open. It finally stopped completely once the doorway was wide enough for one person to pass through, and only a sliver of the door remained in the doorway.

Seron pointed his flashlight at the stone hallway beyond.

The hallway was about 2 meters in height—more than enough for the average person to pass through comfortably. It was about 1 meter wide, with alcoves for candles in the walls at regular intervals.

The light from the flashlight hit a wall about 5 meters down the hall, which led to a left turn. There were no people or objects in sight.

"Wow!" Larry cried. "So there really is a passage here. And judging from the size, it's gotta be connected to something! You're actually pretty good, Lia," he said, turning around.

"Hey, I take offense to the 'actually'," Natalia said, though she sounded at least 70 percent happy.

"I give you my congratulations, Natalia!"

"Megmica... Don't think you got the right expression there, but thanks."

"That was amazing. I'm very impressed. It's certainly a good thing that we all decided to come to the basement together."

"Sure is. Teamwork's one of the most important things in life. Yep."

"Can I cover this story sometime? Let's see...the title should be 'Master Listener Understands Animal Speech?'"

"Let's not get too ahead of ourselves."

While the others heaped praises on Natalia, Seron crouched down and examined the base of the stone door.

Soon, he stepped away and asked Larry for something small and solid.

"Huh? ... Well, I've got some canned food if that works."

"Yeah. Please."

"Right. Are you gonna tap on the walls with it?"



“No, I’m going to use it as a doorjamb. And I need tape too, if you have any,” Seron said, as terse as ever.

“Aha! Makes sense,” Larry said, this time quick on the uptake. Seron nodded.

Larry pulled out a large roll of tape from his backpack, and a rather small tin can.

The tin was colored a murky green, and was simply labeled ‘CORNERED BEEF: Serve warm for better flavor’.

Seron took the things with a word of thanks and placed the tin can beside the door. Then he cut off a long length of tape and secured the tin so it wouldn’t roll away.

“Now the door won’t close behind us. What next?” Larry asked.

“We’ll have to go further inside.”

“That’s the spirit. And what about you guys?”

“I’m going!” Natalia replied.

Seron turned. “I guess I can’t leave you guys behind at this point. Let’s take our time and examine the passage carefully as we go.”

“Let’s. You can never be too careful.”

Seron led the way, turning on his flashlight and stepping into the doorway. Larry followed, pulling on his backpack. “Watch your head, Lia.”

“Thanks for the concern, shortie.”

Natalia touched her gloved hands to the floor as she passed through. Then she turned around and helped Meg through.

Seron slowly walked forward. Jenny and Nick safely made it into the passage as well.

Seron and Larry kept their lights on the floor ahead as they walked.

“It’s nice and cool in here. Perfect for summertime,” Natalia commented. Meg followed close behind her, tightly gripping Natalia’s sleeve.

“This place might warrant an article or two, even without the case of the mysterious face,” Nick noted from the very back of the entourage. Jenny agreed.

“You guys aren’t scared at all, are you?” Larry mumbled.

Slowly, they approached the first corner. Seron and Larry were ready for someone to pop out from behind it.

“Hello? Is anyone here?” Seron yelled into the passage. Larry followed.

“Is anybody down here? We’re on our way!”

They exchanged glances and nodded. Then—

“Let’s go!”

They lunged around the corner.

And they sighed in unison.

“Well?” asked Natalia.

“The passage keeps going. For another 10 meters or so,” Larry replied. Seron was already walking ahead.

When Natalia and the others turned the corner, they saw that the passage continued unchanged. But this time, it was twice as long as the previous stretch. The end of the passage led to another corner, this one turning to the right.

“Well, Seron?” Larry asked.

Seron had to think for a moment. The others waited for an answer.

Natalia pointed her flashlight at Seron's chest. The name 'Maxwell' embroidered on his jacket shone in the darkness. His face was vaguely outlined in the light.

"...We can't just keep going without a plan," Seron finally said, "We'll need more rope if we want to undertake a full-scale exploration. We'll need to make a map, and we'll need extra batteries for the flashlights and a lot more water."

"I agree. We'll each need backpacks and hard hats with flashlights attached. Gotta be prepared." Larry nodded, his watchful eyes on the passage ahead.

"I've decided."

"Yeah? What's your plan, Seron?"

"We'll turn this corner here, and if the passage keeps going we'll give up and go back."

"Pardon? We will go back, you said? We will all together go back to the first building which we entered together?" Meg asked. Seron's response was mechanical, almost cold.

"That's right. I don't want to risk any accidents. What if the passage branches out to the point that we lose our way? And I don't really want to consider this, but what if there's a cave-in? No one knows we're in here—we'll be stranded completely."

"I—I know those facts very well, Seron. But there may be some person just up front still, no? Someone whom no one knows, who does not know that he will be stuck inside here."

"...Probably."

"If that is the case, I after all want to save him. We must save him from here. This is what we are here to do."

"...Megmica."

"Yes?"

With bated breath, everyone waited for Seron to continue. Several seconds passed in silence before they heard him inhale.

"If at all possible, I want to help him, too. But I can't put you in danger for that."

"Nice," Larry said under his breath, his eyes still on the passage ahead. Natalia grinned, knowing that Meg could not see her face from her position. Jenny shrugged with a smile.

"He certainly has a point," Nick said from the back of the group.

Meg was silent. Natalia put a hand on her shoulder. "I know it's tough to accept, Meg. But first, let's look around that last corner. Okay?"

Seron looked into Meg's dejected face. "Please, Megmica. I promise, even if we have to turn back, we're not going to leave him here. We'll get more people here today if we can, or at least by tomorrow. We'll explain the situation to them properly and have a thorough look inside this place. We can ask the drama club for help, too."

"...I understand. I understand, Seron," Meg replied, hanging her head.

"Well. Let's do this," Larry said, stepping forward.

Seron could say no more. He turned and followed after Larry.

Several steps later, Larry whispered to Seron, "Hey, you think we'll find anything around the corner?"

"No," Seron whispered back, "I'm expecting more of the passage."

"I knew you'd say that."

"People used to build the most interesting things, huh."

"I can't tell if you're impressed or annoyed."

“Both, actually.”

“Hey!” Natalia cried. “Enough whispering by yourselves!”

Finally, Seron and Larry reached the corner.

“All right...let’s do this.”

“Yeah. Let’s go.”

This time, they gave no warning as they turned the corner. And—

They were both struck dumb.

Around the corner was a room.

\* \* \*

“Sophia, could you pass me the basting needle?”

“Hm? Right. Here you are, Arthur.”

“Thank you. I’ll take care of this costume, so you can take a break with the others.”

“What? Er...i-it’s okay. I can wait here in case you need more help.”

“Really? Thank you.”

“It’s nothing. ...I had no idea you were so good at sewing, Arthur.”

“I’ve been learning from my sister ever since I was little. She graduated last year, you know. Now she works as a fashion designer at Epstein.”

“Wow. I had no idea.”

“Really? We’ve known each other for so long I thought I might have told you before.”

“Huh? Oh...er, yeah. But I barely know anything about your family.”

“I suppose I haven’t told you much about them. On that note, I don’t know much about your family, either.”

“...S-say! If you want, do you want to come over sometime?”

“Hm? Oh, I’m sorry, Sophia! I didn’t mean it like that. Sorry if I made you uncomfortable.”

“Huh? But I—”

“Yes?”

“I... It’s nothing. Nothing at all.”

“There. The coachman costume is done!”

“Good job, Arthur.”

“Thank you. I’m feeling a little thirsty now. Want to have some tea at the cafeteria?”

“Oh, yes! That sounds great!”

“Excellent. I’ll go get the others.”

“Hm? Oh...right...”

\* \* \*

Several seconds of stunned silence followed Seron and Larry’s discovery. But they quickly regained their senses.

“What...is this?”

“If *you* don’t know, what chance do I have?”

They stood frozen past the corner.

“Hey, what’d you find there?” Natalia asked, turning the corner with the others. They pushed Seron and Larry aside and saw for themselves.

And they all fell silent.

There was a room.

Contrary to their assumption, the passage did not continue beyond the corner. The hallway ended suddenly about 2 meters ahead, and a wide-open space unfolded beside it.

Seron and Larry’s flashlights were still on, but they were unnecessary. Rows of lightbulbs on the wall gave off just enough light to see by.

Though it was hard to tell exactly how large the room was, it was clearly bigger than the first basement room they had entered from. It was longer than it was wide, and the stone wall on the opposite side seemed very low.

The furniture in the room was bathed in orange light.

In the center of the room was a rocking chair, and a dresser stood against the wall. Further inside the room was a bed with metal framing, and neatly folded blankets.

“What...is this?” Natalia gasped.

“Tell me if you ever figure it out, Lia,” Larry said.

“This is certainly a scoop, don’t you agree?” Nick asked Jenny.

“Yeah. But what is it, exactly?”

“This...this is a room. Yes. ‘Room’ in Roxchean, or maybe the better word is a ‘chamber’,” said Meg. No one else could explain any further.

Seron slowly strode forward. Larry went after him.

“Excuse me!” Seron said in a very loud voice at the entrance. He cautiously looked around and stepped into the room proper. There was no one there.

Larry followed after him and slowly scanned their surroundings.

The room was about 15 meters wide and 20 meters long, with the walls made entirely of stone. Stone pillars about 50 centimeters thick stood at intervals in the room—perhaps they supported the building above.

Upon closer examination, he could see a small electric fan, two full bookshelves, a dresser with large doors, and a desk and a chair—the same kind used at the school. There was also a rug with intricate embroidery underneath the desk and the chair.

About half of the lightbulbs installed in the alcoves in the wall were still lit.

Electric wires from the lightbulbs were fixed against the walls. The wires split at points, and several of the branches led into to a socket in the wall.

Three verdant landscape paintings hung on the walls. Perhaps they were there to offset the desolate look of the room.

On the right side of the chamber were two doors. Both were ordinary wooden doors with doorknobs on them. The closer of the doors was red, and the other blue. They were both closed.

“It’s okay, guys. There’s no one here,” said Larry.

The others followed after him.

“This is crazy...there really is a room down here. And it’s pretty nice—it’s even better than my room.”

“Wh-what has happened in this place? Do schools in Roxche hide chambers under the ground normally? Do they?”

“Let’s calm down, Megmica. As far as I know, this is not the norm anywhere in Roxche. Today is simply full of surprises.”

“I’m glad I’ve got a scoop on my hands, but somebody explain what this scoop actually is! How am I supposed to write an article when I don’t have any info to go on?!”

Voices of shock and surprise resounded through the room.

“You could always make up an article to go with the photographs. Just imagine all the possibilities,” Nick suggested with a smile.

“Hmph!”

“Guys, I want you to stay near the entrance,” Seron said, walking around the entrance and examining the furniture. Larry did the same.

The furniture all seemed to be in regular use.

Seron walked up to the bookshelf and scanned its offerings. He picked out what seemed to be the newest of the books.

The book was titled, ‘Bobby and the Lemon’.

“Light, please.”

“Right.” Larry nodded, casting light on the book. Seron flipped backwards through the book and found the copyright page.

“I knew it. This was published last month—I saw an ad for it in the newspaper.”

“What?”

Seron gingerly stuck the book back in the shelf and dragged Larry over to the entrance, where the others waited.

And without warning, he raised his voice.

“Wow! Who knew we’d find such a cool place underground on campus!”

It was not every day that Seron spoke so loudly. His voice bounced off of the stone walls and ceiling and echoed.

“... You all right, buddy?” Larry asked with a hint of concern, but Seron ignored the question. He spread his arms and took a deep breath, raising his voice again.

“We should use this room! As a clubhouse from now on! It’ll be a secret base! What a find! Nobody’s in here! We should take over the place!”

The others were lost, but Nick alone understood and stepped forward.

“I see now. ... That’s a wonderful idea! This room is large enough to host—no, *house*—six people! What a discovery! We’re now free to escape our parents!”

“Not you too, Nick. I mean, you were always a bit weird, but...” Larry trailed off. But Nick ignored him and continued.

“What do you say, Seron my friend! We should throw out all the furniture we don’t need! And bring in our own things!”

“Great idea! We’ll definitely do that! In fact, we should get started immediately! Let’s all carry out some of this junk!”

“Perfect! We’ll finish the job before the day is over!”

At this point, Jenny and Natalia also noticed what Seron was doing.

“I see. I get your plan.” Jenny nodded.

“Expected nothing less from the drama club,” said Natalia. Larry, who was still in the dark, offered a correction. “Seron’s not in the drama club. In fact, Nick isn’t, either.”

“Okay, okay. Just be quiet and listen, Larry.”

As Larry tilted his head and Meg shrank back at the sudden noise, Nick and Seron continued.

“What do you say, Seron! That desk is awfully familiar, don’t you think? We don’t need one of those!”

“Yeah! There are plenty of those back at the school! We’ll dismantle it and throw it out! And bring in a better one!” Seron replied.

Nick took a deep breath to continue—

“W-wait! Don’t do it!”

The voice did not belong to any of the six students.

The voice came from a man.

## **Chapter 11: The Voice**

“W-wait! Don’t do it!”

“WHOA!”

Larry was the most surprised of them all. With a yell, he leapt and turned in the direction of the voice.

Meg flinched as well. Natalia stepped before her protectively. Seron and Nick pointed their flashlights at the source of the voice. Jenny did the same, a second later.

“Argh...my eyes...”

A man had leapt out of the red door.

He was slender in build and wore dark green clothes that resembled a tracksuit. He was also wearing sneakers.

He was dressed like a homeless person one might find in the alleys of the Capital District, but he was not particularly unkempt and he did not smell.

Because he was covering his eyes, it was impossible to tell what kind of an expression he was wearing. A beard spread over his face and he was slightly balding. His long hair was black, halfway to grey, and went down all the way to his shoulders. The man was probably in his fifties or sixties.

“My eyes...please...” the man repeated himself. His voice was somewhat androgynous and sounded very soft-spoken.

“I don’t think we’ll need the lights, everyone,” Seron said, turning off his flashlight. Nick and Jenny did the same.

“Oh...thank you...” the man sighed, lowering his hands.

The man’s face emerged in the dim light. Wrinkles dug trenches in his forehead and at the corners of his eyes, making him look very old indeed. He could almost pass for 80.

“It’s on you now, Seron,” Larry said, calming down. He stepped aside.

“Yeah. Seron can speak for us. That all right with everyone?” asked Natalia.

No one objected.

Seron stepped forward, coming to a stop about 5 meters from the man. “Good afternoon. My name is Seron Maxwell. I’m a third-year student at this secondary school.”

He began with a greeting and an introduction. The man’s brows twitched.

“Thank you for coming outside. First, I’d like to apologize on everyone’s behalf. My friend and I were not serious when we were raising our voices earlier. We were bluffing, as we believed it would be impossible to bring you out otherwise. I’m terribly sorry.”

Larry and Meg, who finally understood what Seron and Nick had been doing earlier, nodded in understanding.

Several seconds of silence followed.

Would the man say no more, the students wondered, when he finally opened his mouth.

“I’ve been listening to your voices all this time. Ever since you were outside. So I hid. I never thought you’d make it all the way in here. I’m impressed.”

The students had not expected words of praise. They exchanged awkward glances. Seron continued. “There are other rooms through those doors, yes?”

“That’s right. There are many ancient passageways here.”





“Do you live here?”

“I do.”

“Is there anyone else here?”

“No. It’s just me.”

The man answered Seron’s questions with frank resignation.

“How long have you been here?”

“About two years, I suppose,” the man said awkwardly.

Seron could hear the others gasp behind him. He continued indifferently, “That’s a very long time, sir. Wasn’t it uncomfortable down here?”

“No.” The man shook his head.

“This may be a basement, but it must have been freezing cold during the winter. How did you survive?”

“There are hot water pipes here. I help myself when I need it.”

“I see. This place must receive hot water from the boiler room, just like the communal bath in the dormitories. So you can stay warm and even take baths in here. Is there a bathroom behind one of those doors?”

The man nodded.

“What do you do about food?”

“I...can’t answer that.”

“I see. ...Let me get to the point. The barred windows in the basement are going to be sealed off soon.”

“I know. Some young men came to do some work yesterday and were talking very loudly about it. As if they were talking to me.”

“...We came all this way to tell you: wouldn’t it be best to leave this place?”

“Where would you have me go?”

Seron was silent.

“I have nowhere else to go. I came out here to tell you: won’t you let me live in peace here?”

“...I can’t presume to say I know what led you here, but this building is part of a school campus. Wouldn’t it be better to receive the protection of the law and its benefits in a publicly-operated facility? They wouldn’t turn you away.”

“I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“I can’t say.”

“I see...”

Seron put the conversation on hold there. Then he turned to Larry without warning.

“All this searching’s making me hungry. You brought the sandwiches, Larry?”

“Huh? Oh, right! Lemme dig them up.”

Larry pulled off his backpack and took out the wisteria lunchbox.

Seron received the lunchbox, took off his gloves, and removed the lid. “Excuse me. I’m the only one who skipped lunch today,” he said, and sat himself on the floor.

Seron placed the lunchbox on the floor in front of him, took out one of the sandwiches, and took a very big bite.

The man watched Seron through wrinkled eyes.

“Here, help yourself. Our dormitory cafeteria serves the best food around,” Seron said, holding out the lunchbox towards the man.

From behind Larry, Nick whispered to Natalia, “Now I’m even more convinced that Seron should join the drama club.”

For a time, the man stared at the sandwich in Seron’s hand.

“Two’s a little too much for me,” Seron added with a smile.

“Thank you. ...I’ll help myself.”

The man finally sat on the floor in front of Seron and took the sandwich with a wrinkled hand. He slowly brought it to his mouth with both hands, stared, and bit down.

His eyes slowly grew wet.

As did Meg’s, as she watched him eat.

For some time, the only sound in the basement was that of two people munching on their sandwiches.

And—

“You know, I’m feeling kinda hungry right about now.”

“Tell me the truth, Lia. You’re actually more than one person, right? You traded places with another Natalia after lunch, right?”

As Natalia and Larry joked around, Meg burst into laughter.

After the meal, the man met Seron’s gaze and finally spoke.

“Why would you go so far for me?”

“We have many reasons, but our biggest reason is that someone here is very concerned about you,” Seron said, turning around.

The man noticed Meg quietly looking at him. A shadow flitted past his expression. He shook his head. “I can’t. I can’t leave this place.”

“B-but why is that the case? I do not want to see a person dying in this sort of place!” Meg pleaded.

“Ah...”

The man’s eyes flew open. He froze.

Without a word, he stared at Meg. Seron, Meg, and the others could not read his expression.

“Miss...are you from Sou Be-Il?” he said suddenly.

Natalia, Nick, Larry, and Seron did not understand what he said.

“Yes! I am! My family moved to the Capital District two years ago, but I was born and raised in Sou Be-Il! I was born in Shelèstaras, and I grew up in Parselturé after I turned three!” Meg cried ecstatically. But four of the others still did not understand a word. Meg and the man were conversing in Bezelese, the official language of Sou Be-Il.

Jenny said, “They’re both speaking Bezelese.”

“What?” Larry exclaimed, turning to Jenny. “You know Bezelese?”

Jenny was indignant at his disbelief. “We have Bezelese classes at school, you know. I took it last term.”

"Give me a break. You can't learn a language in just half a year," Larry said, still reeling from shock.

"Jenny has quite the intellect, you know. She's never fallen out of the top 10 in our year. I believe she fell to 8th at the lowest."

"How'd you know that, princess?"

"It's common knowledge. Although I don't believe you'd read about it in any school newspaper," Nick joked, winking with a smile.

"Hmph." Jenny looked away grumpily.

Larry's eyes were wide. "That's really impressive. They say the strongest hawk hides his talons, but this is on another level altogether. This is practically inspirational, Jenny!"

"I owe you a punch later, blondie."

"C'mon, I'm just trying to say you're not all bad. It was a compliment."

"Make that *two* punches."

"Guys," Natalia interrupted. "Save the spat for later. I won't get in your way then."

"What? You're *supposed* to stop people who're arguing, Lia."

"Doesn't matter. Anyway, what did they just say in Bezelese, Jenny?"

"The man asked pigtails where she was from, and she told him where," Jenny replied.

Meg turned to the man and switched to Roxchean so everyone could understand, calming down. "Sir, are you a person from Sou Be-Il? Yes? You must be a person from Sou Be-Il, yes? I feel the air of the Kingdom of Iltoa in your speaking. Is there no place for you to be in Roxche, so you are living in this kind of place? Then that is very, very sad!"

The man silently hung his head.

He did not look up for some time, but eventually he squeezed out a feeble voice.

"I can't go back anymore...not to Sou Be-Il, and not to Roxche... I'm happy here..."

"You cannot be happy to close your life here where no one knows!" Meg pleaded in anguish. Her voice echoed through the room, seemingly reverberating against their eardrums.

Several seconds passed in silence.

"That's the chorus club for you..." Natalia finally whispered.

"If I tell my father about your situations, he will borrow us his power! My father said that he knows a man at the embassy of our homeland! He will certainly be able to help you!"

Seron waited for Meg to finish before picking up where she left off. "What do you say? We might be able to help you, if you'll tell us why you refuse to leave."

"Please wait, Seron!" Meg cried, running to him. She squatted behind Seron, who was still seated, and reached out with her left hand. And she tightly grabbed his right shoulder.

Seron turned.

He came face-to-face with Meg, who was close enough for his breath to reach her.

Seron desperately held back his racing heart.

"What is it?" he managed to say.

"May we ask the reasons from him later? This person must be helped! The embassy! We must telephone the embassy and ask for its help!"

Meg's eyes were brimming with tears. Seron quietly replied,

"We can't just do that."

"Why can we not?"

Seron did not answer—instead, he raised his left hand. He gently took Meg’s pale hand from his shoulder and slowly, very slowly, took it off his shoulder.

Meg pulled her hand back and placed it over her stomach, looking away. Then she raised her head and looked Seron in the eye. “Why?”

Seron cast her a warm look.

“If this man is hiding in here because he committed a crime, we should be contacting the police, not the embassy. When I said ‘publicly-funded facility’ earlier, I was also including the possibility of prison. If he’s broken the law, it doesn’t matter where he’s from.”

“But that’s...”

Meg trailed off. She could not finish her sentence.

“Man...learn some tact, Seron,” Larry said to himself, cradling his head in his hands.

“He’s being a goody-two-shoes, but he’s right,” said Natalia, “We can’t exactly help someone out if he’s a criminal.”

The man hung his head. Seron continued. “I understand that you wish to remain down here. But we can’t let you do that anymore.” He sounded almost cold. “Now that we know you’re living here, we can’t just leave you.”

“...I...I just wanted to stay here forever,” the man said.

“I’m afraid that’s not possible,” Seron replied immediately. The man looked up at him with tears in his eyes.

“Then...then what am I supposed to do?! What would you have me do?”

“It’s simple! Just kill those children!”

The answer came from behind the students.

“Kill them! They are your enemies! Now silence them! Then you can return to your peaceful life, and you won’t have to harm anyone ever again! Erase them!”

It was a man’s voice.

The voice came from down the passage the students had come through. It sounded strangely deep and muffled, like the owner of the voice was holding something in front of his mouth.

“Hm?”

Nick turned, but there was no one in his line of sight.

Larry did an about-face and headed for the passage—

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAARGH!”

The man screamed behind him. Larry turned right back, startled.

“Ugh!”

The first thing he saw was the man, his hair wild and his stance unsteady as he charged towards Meg.

Meg flinched at the sudden turn of events, and was rooted to the floor. The man reached forward—

“Hah!”

“Urgh!”

Seron stood with a cry, tackling the man. The man flew forward and landed on his shoulder.

Seron was also knocked aside by the impact—

“Whoa!”

“Eek!”

He landed on the floor, holding Meg in his arms.

He was on the verge of crushing her against the floor.

“Ah!”

He flipped around, still holding Meg. His back hit the cold, hard floor.

And a second later, Meg’s forehead came crashing down near his mouth, knocking his head against the floor. There were two clear impacts.

“Ow!”

“Ah!”

“Megmica!”

Natalia ran over and slowly helped Meg to her feet.

“I am all right. I am—”

“Good to hear.” Natalia nodded, and looked down. Seron was on the floor with a bleeding lip.

“Ouch...” he muttered, putting a hand to his mouth.

“Seron’s still alive, so don’t worry ‘bout him. Make sure to thank him later,” Natalia said to Meg.

“Damn it!” Larry cried, lunging at the fallen man. He put his knee on the man’s back and twisted back his right arm—

“What are you doing? They’re still alive! Kill them! Now! Kill them all!” the voice cried from the passage again.

“Who the heck?!” Larry looked up, distracted. The man flailed wildly and kicked him in the leg.

“Ow!”

Larry fell to the floor. The man scrambled away on all fours like a spider.

“What in the world...?” Larry gasped, slowly getting to his feet. “Fine.” He slowly put his left foot forward and took a fighting stance.

The man also stood. The red door was right behind him, but he did not try to run. He simply glared at Larry, taking a low stance. His wrinkled eyes were concealed by the darkness.

“Quickly! Kill them all! You can do this!” the voice called again.

“Hey! I dunno who you are, but shut up back there!” Natalia snapped.

“Yeah! Enough is enough!” Jenny added. She then looked up at Nick. “Hey, princess! Go take care of that guy out there!”

“I’m afraid I’m not suited hand-to-hand combat, Jenny.”

“Don’t worry! We’ll tell your family that you died honorably in battle!”

“But I...” Nick trailed off, shrugging. That was when Seron spoke.

“No, it’s all right,” he said, wiping his mouth, “You don’t have to go, Nick. Everyone, go over to one of the corners. We need to restrain this man first. —Larry?”

“Yeah?” Larry replied without looking back.

“How is he?”

“Definitely not easy. He’s strong.”

“I see. Then you’ll need some help.”

“Probably.”

“I’m not as strong as you are, but I’ll try not to get in your way.”

“Yeah! Thanks, buddy!”

Seron turned to face Meg, whom Natalia was supporting by the shoulders.

“I need your help, Megmica.”

“My help?”

“Yes. Larry and I are going to try and restrain him. But if things don’t work out... I want you to say something in Bezelese to distract him. Say it loudly.”

“B-but what type of words do I speak?”

“It doesn’t really matter, but try to say something that’ll make him nostalgic. That seems to be his weakness.”

“What is the meaning of ‘nostalgic’?”

“Er...well...it’s like the feeling you get when you miss your home.”

“I see. I understand that feeling.”

“I’m counting on you. Natalia, take care of Megmica. And Jenny, stay right where you are. As for Nick...” Seron trailed off.

“I hope you won’t be sending me off unarmed to do single combat.”

“Right. Larry and I will do something about the man, so take care of the girls.”

“I suppose I could manage that.”

Seron turned around.

The man stood with his back to the wall, leaning forward as he glared at Seron and Larry. His skinny arms were slightly bent, like a feral monkey ready to attack.

Seron took several steps forward and stood next to Larry.

“Let me borrow this,” he said, taking the flashlight from Larry’s pocket.

“Kill them! I order you to kill them all! This is an order! An order!”

The mysterious voice filled the basement once more. Larry groaned. “Whoever that guy is, he’s next.”

“I have a hunch about him.”

“Really? Looking forward to the summation, then. Now let’s work up some sweat.” Larry grinned belligerently.

At that moment—

“URGH!”

The man lunged.

Seron dodged to the left, and Larry to the right.

The man chose to charge at Larry. He swung his right arm and attacked, rushing forward.

“He’s fast!” Larry cried, guarding with his left arm and taking a step back. The wall was only 3 meters behind him.

Larry evaded the attack and dodged to the right.

The man passed him by and lunged at the wall, landing on both feet and launching himself back at Larry.

“Duck!” Seron cried.



Larry stopped mid-turn and did as Seron instructed.

The man's arm cut the air above Larry, where his face would have been had he not ducked.

"Whoa!"

Larry spun while crouching and stood. The man also took a lunging stance again.

"Over here!" Seron yelled, attacking the man's face.

The attack had come from 3 meters away.

The moment the man turned to him, two flashlights shone directly into his eyes. Seron was aiming them both into his face.

"Argh!" the man cried, shielding his eyes.

"Nice, Seron!"

Larry tackled the man in the back. He tried to take the man down and press him against the floor, but the man managed to remain standing and help up his fists.

Seron kept the lights on the man; but the man simply closed his eyes and swung blindly at Larry.

"Ugh! Damn it!" Larry spat, taking a direct hit to the spine. But he did not end his attack.

The man punched him a second time.

"Urgh..."

Larry's knee hit the floor.

"Hey!"

Seron cast the flashlights aside and charged at the man. He grabbed the man's arm before the third attack and desperately tried to restrain him.

"Meg! Now!"

"AAAARGH!" the man howled, swinging his arms.

"Ugh! Ow!"

His elbow smashed against Seron's face several times. Seron's lip bled again, scattering red droplets against the floor.

"This is crazy... Argh! That hurts!"

Larry, who was also trying to restrain the man, grimaced as the man kicked him in the shin.

"This is not good..." Nick whispered, tense.

That was when a song began to echo throughout the basement.

Seron, Larry, Nick, and Natalia did not understand the meaning of the lyrics.

But the song resounded through the room, its beautiful and clear melody reverberating against the walls and floor and ceiling.

Jenny realized that the song was a call of nostalgia.

"Not bad at all. It's a shame I can't capture sounds on my camera."

Strauski Megmica was singing.

With her eyes gently shut and her arms spread wide, she slowly swayed as she sang.

Her soprano voice filled the room and froze everyone in their tracks.

Even Larry and Seron—

And the man between them as well.

“Ah...”

The man had his hands raised in an attempt to throw Seron off. But he stood stock-still and closed his eyes, nodding along to the rhythm.

Larry slowly pulled himself away.

“Looks like it’s working.”

The man was smiling like a child, tears running down his face.

Seron also let go of the man. He wiped the blood from his mouth and slowly took off his jacket.

Then he silently signaled Larry, mimicking tying a knot with his jacket. Larry nodded and took off his own.

The song continued.

Layers of echoes wove themselves together into a haunting melody, finally crescendoing into one last high note.

And Meg finally finished the song.

“Now!”

“Right!”

Seron and Larry leapt at once as the man stood in a daze.

Seron began by grabbing the man’s arms from behind. At the same time, Larry leapt at the man’s feet.

“Huh?”

Unsurprisingly, in his teary-eyed state the man was taken by surprise. Larry quickly wrapped his jacket around the man’s legs and tied it in a knot.

Then he pulled the man’s legs from under him.

“Ah—”

The man fell with ease. Seron cushioned the man’s fall against his own legs, holding him by the hands.

And—

“Go, Larry!”

Seron tossed his jacket to Larry, who caught it in midair and quickly tied it around the man’s wrists.

“Done! Good job, Seron.”

Once the man was fully restrained, Seron let the man down on the floor.

“Ugh... Aaaaaaaaaaah...”

The man screamed, sobbing.

“I want to go back...back to Sou Be-Il...” he gasped in Bezelese.

“Sorry, sir. You didn’t give us much of a choice,” Larry said.

“We’re very sorry. We wanted to make sure no one was hurt,” Seron said, clearly injured himself. He looked at Meg.

Meg was watching them sadly.

“...Thank you, Megmica. You saved us,” Seron said.

But Meg hung her head in silence.

Seron lowered his head. Then he looked up. “Larry, check the passage and see if the man’s still around.”

“Gotcha!”

Larry leapt forward and grabbed his still-lit flashlight off the floor. He passed by Natalia, Nick and Jenny, who were standing back, and rushed into the passage. “Hold it right there, you creep!”

“I’m going too!” Jenny declared, turning on her flashlight and chasing after Larry.

She turned the corner to her left and ran for about 10 meters, then turned the corner to her right. She did not see Larry yet.

Jenny ran through the rest of the passageway and crawled out through the secret entrance. Along the way, she spotted the can of corned beef—it was partly crushed, its contents dribbling out.

When she emerged into the first of the basement rooms,

“Stop!”

Larry was loudly clambering up the ladder.

Jenny rushed after him and followed Larry upstairs. Once she was on the first floor filled with sunlight, she saw Larry pushing against the door.

“Damn it! Open!”

Several times Larry tackled the door, his hands turning the knob. But the door only shook in its frame.

Jenny realized that the owner of the mysterious voice must be holding the door shut. She leapt into action.

“Move, blondie!”

She sprinted across the room with the energy of a tiny cannonball.

“Whoa!”

As Larry scrambled away, she kicked down the door with her feet.

The door slammed open, and they heard someone scrambling away. Jenny landed on her rear with her bag held protectively against her stomach.

And she ordered Larry,

“Go get him!”

“Yeah! Thanks, Jenny!”

Seron squatted behind the restrained man and looked at his face.

“Ugh...ah...”

The man was weeping. Seron slowly looked away.

That was when a pale, slender hand reached out to the man.

“Huh?”

When Seron looked up, he saw Meg kneeling on the floor before him.

Meg gently placed her hands on the man’s shoulders.

“It’s all right now, sir. Don’t worry. You don’t have to kill anyone anymore. Relax and get some rest. I’ll do everything I can to help you, I promise. Even if everyone here decides to treat you as an enemy, I’ll help you. So please...calm down.”

She spoke to him gently, kindly.  
Seron did not understand what she had said in the language of the West.  
But he nonetheless watched the girl from Sou Be-Il, who wore the face of a loving mother.

*'Please,'* Seron's bloodied lips said silently.  
He slowly rose to his feet and turned to Natalia and Nick. "I think we'll be all right here now. We can leave the rest to Larry."

"Right. You think he's gonna be okay?"

"Yeah."

"What if the guy's stronger than Larry?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. I only told Larry to go see if the man was still around—as long as we can confirm who it was, it doesn't matter if he gets away. I've got a pretty good idea about this mysterious voice, anyway."

"What?"

"Are you certain?"

Natalia and Nick were both surprised.

Meg also looked up, and asked in Roxchean, "Who is that man? The man who did something like this? The man who trapped this man in a place like this and evilly ordered to hurt other people!"

Seron slowly turned.

He had never seen such an expression on Meg before. He had never even imagined such a thing.

"Who is that man?!" she demanded like a snarling hound.

Seron replied,

"Mr. Murdoch."



## **Chapter 12: The Letter**

“Whoa! Mr. Murdoch?!”

When Larry chased the mysterious man into the hallway, he spotted the teacher collapsed near the middle of the building.

Mr. Murdoch was wearing brown pants and a blue polo shirt. Larry had seen him many times in Roxchean class, and once that very morning at the faculty office.

“Ugh!” Mr. Murdoch scrambled to his feet and turned. When he spotted Larry at the end of the hall, cold sweat began running down his face. “S-stay away from me!”

“Afraid I can’t do that, sir. We’d like to have a nice, long talk with you,” Larry said, slowly making his way down the hall.

“V-violence against a teacher is grounds for expulsion! Do you understand?” Mr. Murdoch threatened.

“Probably not. Unlike me, Larry here’s an idiot,” Jenny said, striding into the hallway.

Larry stopped in his tracks, his eyes narrowing. “We need to talk, Jenny.”

“Before that, I’ll be helping you nab a bad guy. I think I deserve a word of thanks, Larry.”

“Right. Never thought you actually remembered my name.”

“I was just guessing. So you really were Larry, huh.”

“Nice name, right? Don’t you forget it. Now—” Larry resumed walking.

“Argh...” Mr. Murdoch quickly turned and fled out the wide-open door.

“Hold it!”

Larry sprinted after him. Jenny followed.

Larry ran all the way through the hall, out the door, and down the stairs. When he looked around, he spotted Mr. Murdoch disappear to the right.

“There!” he cried, charging ahead.

“When’d you start suspecting him, Seron?” “Indeed. We only really had two suspects to begin with, but I don’t believe there was any concrete evidence that pointed to him,” Natalia and Nick asked in turn.

“It was when we spoke to him at the faculty office. I guess it’s similar to what Megmica said she felt. I glossed over it when Larry asked because I didn’t think it was time to mention it.” Seron said. “I think...if I were in Mr. Murdoch’s shoes, I would have gotten angry at the students.”

Natalia and Nick, and Meg—who was still sitting on the floor—gave him quizzical looks. Seron continued.

“Suppose you were napping away in the faculty office when a group of students barged in with a ridiculous photograph and seriously told you that there was a mysterious man in the storehouse basement. How would you react?”

“Aha... I get it.” Natalia nodded.

Nick put a hand to his lips. “I see now. Normally, a teacher would simply get angry at the students. Not only that, if we suppose that a teacher is behind this man’s imprisonment, it all fits together. A teacher would naturally know about the basement, and could easily bring in a regular

supply of food. He must have stolen the film when we came to the storehouse to take a look. In fact, Mr. Murdoch was the one who suggested that we look at the storehouse to begin with.”

Seron nodded. “Yeah. But that’s only circumstantial evidence. That’s exactly why Mr. Murdoch went out of his way to steal the film. I thought the man here might be our only source of information, but Mr. Murdoch ended up revealing himself through his own actions.”

“But why? Why would he do this thing?” asked Meg.

“I’m not sure yet,” Seron said plainly to the girl he had barely been able to speak to the previous day. “We won’t know until we figure out who this man here is. All we can do is question Mr Murdoch until we get the answers. Will you come with us?”

Meg nodded. “Yes, I will come with you. Please, you must let me question too.”

Natalia narrowed her eyes, smiling. When she turned, she saw Nick smiling as well. He noticed her gaze.

“You jealous?” Natalia asked.

“Not at all,” Nick replied.

“Hold it!”

Larry was a fast runner; he easily caught up to Mr. Murdoch, who was desperately trying to cross the grounds.

“Sorry, sir!” Larry said, giving him a light shove in the back.

“Agh!”

That was enough to throw Mr. Murdoch off-balance. He narrowly managed to dampen the impact and rolled across the ground, finally landing on his backside.

“Mr. Murdoch...we’ve got a lot of questions for you,” Larry said, punching his open palm with his fist.

“O-of course. Let’s not resort to violence, now,” Mr. Murdoch replied, breathing heavily with sweat running down his dirt-covered face.

Jenny caught up to them and stopped next to Larry. “Mr. Murdoch, please give back the film.”

“Wh-what are you talking about?”

“Don’t play dumb, sir. You know, it’s all starting to add up. The thief only stole that one piece of film. The rest of the room was untouched. The thief knew exactly where to look, which means they have some knowledge about cameras and photography.”

Mr. Murdoch could not argue. Larry glanced at him, then at Jenny. “You’re pretty good.”

“I-I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Mr. Murdoch protested, “And the fact that I’m knowledgeable about cameras doesn’t prove that I’m your thief. Why are you chasing me, anyway? I went into the storehouse because I saw the door was open. I only ran because Larry came charging at me,” Mr. Murdoch said, forcing a smile onto his face.

“Seriously...man up, Mr. Murdoch.” Larry frowned.

“You can’t arrest me without evidence. You know that, right? I don’t know anything about any film.”

“Is that any way an adult should be acting, sir?”

“Who do you think people will believe? An adult, or a teenager?” Mr. Murdoch smiled as he slowly rose. He dusted himself off and held his head high. “Unfounded accusations and





violence against a teacher is grounds for punishment. Secondary school is a strict place, Larry Hepburn. You're as good as expelled. Just imagine how heartbroken your honorable family will be."

"But..." Larry trailed off. He had nothing to say.

"Never mind, Larry. Look, it's a waste of time trying to talk to Mr. Murdoch. Just grab him or whatever, even if you have to get rough," Jenny said, taking out her camera and focusing on his face.

"Right...but then what?" Larry asked. Jenny pressed the shutter and took a picture. Then she looked up, shrugging.

"Who knows? Either way—"

"Yeah?"

"In the worst-case scenario, you're the only one getting expelled."

"...We're gonna have to have a nice, long talk one of these days, Jenny."

"Are you trying to hit on me?"

"In your dreams." Larry returned his gaze to Mr. Murdoch. "Look, sir. I don't know anything about evidence and stuff. I just want you to come with us and speak with Seron. You know he's at least a hundred times smarter than I am. Just try and talk your way out in front of him," he said, stepping forward.

"Wh-what are you saying? I should be patrolling the campus. I don't have time for your games."

"Do you have no shame, Mr. Murdoch?"

"Sh-shut up! Don't you look your nose down at a teacher!"

"Look, sir. I may be stupid, but I really enjoyed your classes," Larry said, reaching out to grab Mr. Murdoch's arm.

"G-get away from me!" Mr. Murdoch cried, flailing. But Larry easily avoided the attack.

"You're only tiring yourself out, sir."

"Sh-shut up! Get back! Argh!"

Half-delirious, Mr. Murdoch swung his left arm at Larry.

He was much slower than the man in the basement.

"Phew..." With a sigh, Larry made to lean back and avoid the blow—

"Freeze!"

"Huh?"

—But he reacted reflexively at a sudden command.

And was decked hard in the face.

"Ugh!"

Mr. Murdoch's fist made contact with Larry's right cheek and the tip of his nose. Larry staggered back several steps before losing his balance and falling on his backside. Jenny snapped up photographs.

"Damn it!" Larry swore. His nose was bleeding. Jenny pressed the shutter again.

Mr. Murdoch froze mid-punch, as though he could not believe that his attack had connected. But he quickly recovered and grinned.

"S-serves you right! That's what happens when you try to assault a teacher!"

Larry shot Mr. Murdoch a glare, ignoring the blood streaming down his chin. Then—

“What’s going on?” asked a male voice.

Mr. Murdoch flinched and turned. Larry slowly stood.

Jenny also turned. And the moment she spotted the owner of the voice, she cried out.

“It’s him!”

Outside the door to the nearest building stood a man in blue work wear.

It was Hartnett. He strode over to the three people on the grounds. “What happened here, Mr. Murdoch?”

“...Just a minor issue with student discipline. Nothing to see here.”

“Is that so?”

The adults could not sound any more businesslike.

“Hey! This is *not* a minor issue!” Jenny cut in loudly. “The man in the basement does exist, Mr. Hartnett. We saw him in person. And Mr. Murdoch tried to get the man to kill us. I’d also like to accuse Mr. Murdoch of stealing my film.”

Hartnett turned to Murdoch. “Is this true, sir?”

“I-I have no idea what she’s going on about! You know how teenagers are; they’re just spouting nonsense. And this student is also infamous for her fabricated newspapers!”

“Oh?” Hartnett’s gaze returned to Jenny.

Then he looked at Larry, who stood 3 meters away with his nose bleeding.

“If you’ll excuse me, I have work to do!” Mr. Murdoch declared, turning on his heels—

“Why is that student bleeding?” asked Hartnett.

“Well...er...”

Mr. Murdoch trailed off. Larry spoke up in his stead, blood dribbling down his face.

“Because Mr. Murdoch just punched me.”

Larry slowly approached Mr. Murdoch, ready to grab him if he tried to run.

“Is this true, Mr. Murdoch?”

“What? I—”

“I suppose it must be. Someone had to have hit the boy, and the only people here are you and the camera girl here. And I’m not sure arms this skinny could deck someone hard enough for an injury like this.”

“You never know until you try,” Jenny chimed in.

“Let’s not do that,” Larry replied from behind Mr. Murdoch.

Jenny held up her camera. “I have evidence right here, Mr. Hartnett. I’ll submit the photos once I finish developing them.”

Mr. Murdoch paled visibly. Hartnett shot him a glare.

“This is unacceptable, sir. What kind of teacher assaults one of his precious students?”

“He’s not really a precious kind of guy, actually.”

“Could you be quiet for a bit, Jenny?” Larry complained.

“I’m going to have to ask you a few questions about your use of force against a student, Mr. Murdoch. Come with me. You’ll have to postpone your business for later.”

“What has gotten into you, Hartnett? You’re an outsider! This is school business!”

“Mr. Murdoch, you hit this student hard enough to bleed. This is a clear case of assault.”

Hartnett reached into his shirt and pulled out an ID card he had been hiding on a lanyard under his top.

He pulled open the folded case and flashed it to Mr. Murdoch with a practiced hand.

“Wha...?”

“Considering my job, I’m afraid I can’t let this slide. You’ll have to come with me, Mr. Murdoch. We’ll listen to your side of the story in detail somewhere else.”

Mr. Murdoch was frozen; several seconds passed before he finally managed something like a groan.

“Ah...argh...it can’t be...”

He fell to his knees, cradling his head in his hands.

And Larry—nursing his bloody nose with a handkerchief—was finally given a clear view of the object in Hartnett’s hand.

In the ID was a photo of Hartnett in a black uniform. Over the photo were the words ‘Confederation Police’.

“Oh.”

Larry stood in a daze.

And as Hartnett put away his ID, Larry tightened his grip on his bloody handkerchief, a thin stream of blood flowing down his face.

“You let me get hit on purpose, didn’t you!”

\* \* \*

“Are you all still in there?” asked a male voice.

“Yes we are,” Seron replied.

Seron, Natalia, and Nick were leaning against the wall in the basement room.

In the center of the room, on the cold floor, was the man. He was sleeping like an exhausted child.

And next to him sat Meg, hugging her knees. She seemed to be watching over the man.

“I’m coming in,” the voice said, emerging into the room. It was Hartnett.

“Huh?” Natalia gasped. Nick and Meg seemed surprised as well.

“Where are Larry and Jenny?” asked Nick.

“We’re coming.” “Right here,” they replied from further down the passage. Larry and Jenny soon appeared next to Hartnett.

Larry’s T-shirt was stained with drops of blood. His nosebleed had stopped.

“You all right, Larry?” asked Seron.

“Got socked in the face by a fat guy, but I’m fine. Call this a mark of honor. Sorry to keep you guys waiting down here.”

“So it really was Mr. Murdoch.”

“Sure was! That was a great guess, Seron. Did you suspect him from the start?”

“Yeah. Sorry I couldn’t tell you earlier.”

“It’s fine. All’s well that ends well.”

“What happened up there?” asked Natalia.

“So much. ...I can’t really explain, so ask Mr. Hartnett,” Larry said, avoiding responsibility.

“Hm.”

Hartnett looked around the basement, his eyes fully adjusted to the darkness. He spotted the man lying on the floor with his wrists and legs bound by jackets. The girl sitting next to him glared at Hartnett.

“Where do I begin...?” Hartnett sighed, when Seron went up to him.

“Where did you take Mr. Murdoch?”

“He’s with my team. Don’t worry; they’re keeping a close eye on him.”

“Wait, your team nabbed him? Who are you supposed to be?” asked Natalia.

“People who’re used to this kind of work,” Seron said indifferently, “You’re going to take him to the police station, right?”

“What?” “Pardon?” “...”

Natalia, Nick, and Meg reacted.

Hartnett blinked. “You’re a bright one. That’s exactly what we’re doing.”

“What’s going on here?” asked Natalia.

Larry replied brusquely, “Mr. Hartnett and his team are cops. The Confederation Police, in fact.”

“No way.”

“Astounding.”

Natalia and Nick were shocked.

“What are the Confederation Police?” asked Meg.

Seron replied, “The Roxcheanuk Confederation has a very complex law enforcement system. Each member state has its own police force, and the Capital District does too. And the Confederation military has its own military police. The Confederation Police specializes in cases that span multiple member states. They’re extremely powerful and usually deal with things like terrorism, organized crime, and kidnapping.”

“Oh... I understand. That is very incredible.” Meg nodded, although it wasn’t clear how much of the explanation she had understood.

“How long have you suspected me, Seron?” asked Hartnett.

“At first I was completely fooled. But after I saw Jenny’s photo and noticed Mr. Murdoch’s strange behavior, I thought that you might have something to do with the man in the basement. It was strange, for one, that the Ministry of Education would suddenly decide to cover up a window that had been open for three centuries.”

“I admit it was a bit of a far-fetched excuse.”

“I realized that you might be here to investigate the basement when you carefully rolled up Jenny’s photograph instead of tearing or crumpling it, and when you easily overpowered Larry, who learned hand-to-hand combat in the Confederation Army. Although I wasn’t completely convinced until I saw how Larry was behaving himself in your presence just now.”

“I see.”

“But I never expected to see the Confederation Police here,” Seron said, then pointed at the man on the floor. “Are you here to arrest this man and Mr. Murdoch?”

Meg’s shoulders trembled when she heard the word ‘arrest’. “Will you now arrest this man here? Is it true? Is it not allowed for us to help this man?”

Hartnett shook his head.

“No, Seron. We’re here to protect him.”

“Really?” Seron looked up, his eyes widening.

“Yes. He’s done nothing wrong. Does that make you feel better, Missy?”

“Oh? Y-yes. It makes me feel better,” Meg replied, her eyes narrowing peacefully.

Several seconds of silence passed before Seron spoke again.

“You knew what Mr. Murdoch had been doing from the beginning.”

Hartnett nodded firmly. “That’s right. We’ve been keeping tabs on Mark Murdoch and had his home under surveillance since before summer break. We waited for the holidays to enter the school premises and gather concrete evidence. Although I never imagined I’d end up in a situation like this,” Hartnett said.

“Why weren’t you working today?”

“We received complaints from the school, so we had to pull out. Mark Murdoch must have been the one sending the complaints. He was like this yesterday, too—made excuses and wouldn’t hand over the key. So I was keeping tabs on him alone, and when I saw him enter the storehouse I called my team back. We were going to storm the place together. But who knew you kids would be here first? By the time I came back, Larry was chasing down Mark Murdoch on the grounds.”

“Then he waited for me to get punched in the face and arrested him on the spot,” Larry added, astonished.

“Anyway…” Hartnett trailed off, turning his gaze to the man on the floor. “That’s him, isn’t it?”

“Then who is this man here?” Meg asked desperately, “Who is this poor man? If you know who he is, please tell me. Please do!”

“What if I told you it was classified? …Well, I suppose I shouldn’t put it that way. I’ll tell you.”

Six sets of eyes were on Hartnett. He began to explain.

“This man here is Burt Murdoch. The younger brother of Mark Murdoch, who’s two years his senior.”

“I-is it true?” Meg asked.

“Yes. Do you kids know about the Lestki Island Conflict? Cross-river, they call it the Green Island Conflict. It was about 30 years ago, from 3277 to 3278. It was the last armed conflict between Roxche and Sou Be-Il.”

“Yes, but I’m afraid none of us were there in person to know, Mr. Hartnett,” Seron said sarcastically. “But we learned about it in history class.”

“What did you learn?” Hartnett asked.

“It was the worst war in recent memory, as trench warfare and developments in weapons technology led to an unprecedented number of casualties on both sides,” Nick said casually.

“That’s right.” Hartnett nodded. “Both Murdoch brothers fought in that war. Mark Murdoch returned and became a teacher, but Burt Murdoch never came home. If that was the end, it would have been just another tragedy.”

“But this man is even now alive. Aha, I see! He lived all the time in Sou Be-Il after, yes? Yes?”

“Yes. Burt Murdoch had been injured and taken as a POW. And he refused to return to Roxche.”

“Why?” asked Larry. “I mean, the Great War was such a chaotic mess that it was hard to do a prisoner exchange, but there was definitely at least one after the Lestki Island Conflict.”

Hartnett nodded. “Officially, all POWs were sent back to their homelands. But Burt Murdoch never returned. Probably—no, definitely—because he wanted to yield to his brother.”

The students looked at Hartnett quizzically. He continued to explain.

“The Murdoch brothers grew up without parents. Now, they happened to have a childhood friend in their home village—a girl. The three of them grew up together, and the brothers both fell in love with her. Neither of them managed to confess to her, and she couldn’t choose one of them. So when war broke out, the three of them made a promise. If both brothers came back alive, she would make her choice. And if one of them didn’t make it—”

“Then she’d marry whichever one survived...” Jenny finished, sounding unusually downcast.

“That’s right. Mark Murdoch came home alive. But his brother was declared MIA in the war, and he didn’t come back during any of the prisoner exchanges. So everyone assumed that he must have died. And the two surviving childhood friends got married.”

“So that’s why he chose to stay behind, huh,” Larry mumbled.

“Maybe he thought he’d just get in the way if he came back, since his brother and the childhood friend must have been married already,” Natalia speculated. Jenny frowned.

“That’s stupid. If I were him, I’d have rushed straight back and given my brother a piece of my mind!”

“No one knows exactly why. Maybe Burt Murdoch really liked Sou Be-II,” Hartnett said.

Meg looked at the man on the floor. “But, but why is this man...why is this man now here? He was crying tears. He said he wanted to go back, so why is he in this place? Please tell me!”

Hartnett followed Meg’s gaze to the sleeping man.

“Let me warn you: this isn’t going to be a happy story.”

“It does not matter to me!”

Seron looked at Meg’s profiled face. She was brimming with determination.

He said nothing.

“All right, then,” Hartnett replied, “Three years ago, Mark Murdoch heard unbelievable news from a friend who’d traveled to Sou Be-II. Apparently this friend had seen Burt Murdoch living cross-river. The friend was absolutely convinced that it was him, and insisted that they report to the authorities for a full investigation. But Mark Murdoch refused and personally headed to Sou Be-II to get answers.”

“And he found him?” Seron asked.

“Yes. Burt Murdoch really was alive. I don’t know what happened between them then, but Mark Murdoch made his brother—who by then was a citizen of Sou Be-II—cross the Lutoni back to Roxche. Immigration isn’t much of an issue now, so that alone wasn’t a problem.”

Meg looked up.

“He took his younger brother here...and trapped him in a place like this so he would not be seen by other people? An older brother to his younger brother?”

“I’m afraid so. For some reason, Mark Murdoch didn’t take his brother back home. The moment they returned to Roxche, he smuggled his brother onto campus on a holiday and brought



him here. But just to make things clear, this wasn't a prison. Doesn't this room look surprisingly cozy? Mark Murdoch had been teaching for years—over time, he'd furnished this place to suit his needs. It was a personal lounge for him right on campus. As you can see, Burt Murdoch is in good physical condition and he doesn't seem to be ill at all."

"But...even so..."

Meg closed her eyes and shook her head, unable to say any more.

"Occupancy of public property isn't a heavy offense, but it's still illegal. This is the end for Mark Murdoch's secret hideout," Hartnett said.

"Yeah. We need to set everything straight," Jenny agreed.

"You're in no position to be saying that, you know," Larry said snidely.

"I'm surprised the police discovered this plot at all," said Nick, "No one at the school noticed until Jenny captured Burt Murdoch on camera yesterday."

"Yeah. It wasn't even on the school tabloids," Natalia said.

"I did consider writing something like that. 'Mysterious Man in School Basement?' You have no idea how much I regret not writing it while I had the chance," Jenny grumbled.

"It's because your parents' tax money is going to a good place. Put in a good word with them about the Confederation Police—we're always open to donations from the public," Hartnett joked.

"That's not it," Seron said tersely. Everyone but Hartnett tilted their heads.

Hartnett seemed troubled. "Too smart for your own good, eh."

"So something else tipped you off?" asked Natalia.

"Unfortunately, yes," Hartnett admitted. Natalia looked at Seron.

"Then what? How'd the police find out?"

Seron replied mechanically,

"Someone told the police and spurred them into action. I realized this because of Mr. Hartnett's clothes."

Hartnett shrugged in his work wear.

"The police waited for summer break and only recently managed to get on campus while masquerading as construction workers. It doesn't make sense for them to have so much background information already."

"I get it." Natalia nodded.

"That's correct," said Hartnett, "Someone sent our headquarters a letter detailing the story I just told you. The informant said they felt terrible about reporting Mark Murdoch, but pleaded with us to stop him and rescue Burt Murdoch from the basement. They don't live in the Capital District, so the case was brought to us to avoid a jurisdictional conflict. But we had to investigate the claim before we could make a move."

"Who was the informant?" asked Nick.

"It could only have been one person," Seron replied immediately.

"Ah..."

Meg immediately caught on. She raised her hands to her face in horror.

"No...how could such a terrible thing...?"

She shook her head, her pigtails swishing.

"Ah! I get it. I see now." Jenny understood as well.

“Right. She wasn’t some bystander in the story.”

“I understand now. Such a tragedy,” Nick added, finally realizing the truth.

“Hmm... I give, Seron. Who the heck was it?” asked Larry.

“The third Murdoch.”

“Huh? Oh! ...Man...”

Larry hung his head.

“Yeah. Mrs. Murdoch.”

“Is that about everything?” asked Hartnett.

“Wait.” Jenny stopped him. “We still don’t have a motive for Mr. Murdoch’s actions.”

“There wasn’t a word about the motive in Mrs. Murdoch’s letter. We were just wondering about that ourselves,” Hartnett replied.

“It does not make sense. I simply don’t understand. Mrs. Murdoch would not leave him for his brother at this point—it should by all rights have been a happy reunion,” Nick pointed out. Natalia continued.

“And if he wasn’t planning on bringing his brother home, why’d he even bring him to Roxche? He could have just let his brother live cross-river. There’s no reason to lock him up here and risk getting caught. Any ideas, Seron?”

Seron shook his head. “No. I’ve been thinking all this time, but I just can’t think of an explanation,” he said, surrendering.

“We’ll know once we get a confession out of him.,” Hartnett said, his expression easing.

Then—

“He wanted him to die.”

The heavy, dejected voice came from none other than Larry.

All eyes turned to him.

“What’s that mean?” Natalia asked immediately.

Larry narrowed his eyes sadly.

“Mr. Murdoch wanted his brother to die. Because if the government found out Burt Murdoch was alive, it would put Mr. Murdoch in a tough position. Damn it! This is cruel.”

“Finish explaining before you start crying, kiddo. I’ll lend you my handkerchief.”

“I’m not a crybaby anymore, Lia. ...Mr. Murdoch is Burt Murdoch’s only living relative, right Mr. Hartnett?”

“Yes, he is.”

“Then that means Mr. Murdoch received his military pension.”

“I see.”

Hartnett was the first to realize what Larry was trying to say. Meg, on the other hand, looked confused. Seron stepped up to explain.

“A military pension is money that the government pays to retired soldiers or the family of soldiers killed in action.”

“I see it now. Thank you for explaining this, Seron.”

Larry continued. “The Lestki Island Conflict was geographically limited to the island itself, so one year after the war ended, all MIA personnel were classified as KIA. So Mr.

Murdoch must have received his brother's pension alongside his own for the past 30 years. Not many people know this, but even siblings can collect on Roxche's military pension. But if the Ministry of Defense finds out that Burt Murdoch was alive—that he deserted, like a lot of other soldiers who defected to the West—

“Mr. Murdoch has to give back the pension?” Seron finished. Larry nodded.

“Yeah. Every last Rox. Thirty years' worth is a lot of money.”

“You sure know a lot about pensions, blondie,” Jenny said.

“That's 'cause of this story my grandfather always used to tell me. He had a good friend who was a captain during the Lestki Island Conflict, doing desk work in the Capital District. The friend happened to go to Lestki Island for an inspection, but he got caught up in a sudden offensive and went missing. The major who went with him from the Capital District was killed with shots to the head from a Roxchean gun. The military concluded that the captain killed his CO and deserted to save himself.”

Larry paused. He continued a moment later.

“The captain had a wife. They were married in secret. But the wife never received the pension because her husband deserted. Grandfather knew her in person, and insisted that his friend would never have deserted when his wife was still alive and well in Roxche. But the military wasn't convinced.”

Larry exhaled at length. He looked at the man lying before Meg and took a deep breath.

“Mr. Murdoch must have been floored when he heard about his brother. And when he went to Sou Be-Il in person, he realized that Burt Murdoch really was alive. Mr. Murdoch must have been scared that the ministry of defense might find out—that's why he forced his brother back across the border and hid him in here. Burt Murdoch must have known that he put his brother in a tough position, so he agreed to the plan.”

“I see. It all makes sense.” Seron nodded.

“Great! That clears up everything. You've made our investigation a lot easier, kids,” Hartnett said with a smile.

“Seriously? That's all you care about?” Natalia shot him a sidelong glare. Hartnett seemed undisturbed.

“I'm happy as long as this case is solved.”

“Tch.” Natalia shrugged.

“Mr. Murdoch's probably gonna be arrested for embezzlement. Burt Murdoch will be able to leave the basement, but he'll be known as a deserter for the rest of his life. That's probably why he said earlier that there was nowhere for him in Roxche. And Mrs. Murdoch won't end up happy either. This is...”

Larry trailed off, but Nick picked up from there.

“This is a tragic end for all parties involved. There is nothing we can do at this point.”

Natalia narrowed her eyes.

“Maybe we should have just not figured out the truth... Then again, I guess the police would have found everything out within the week anyway.”

“Yeah,” Jenny added sadly. “It was just a matter of who did the deducing. This isn't our fault. And there's no use feeling guilty over it.”

Larry gave Jenny a look like he wanted to object, but in the end he said nothing.

Meg looked up at Hartnett.

“Oh...but this is just too sad. Is there now nothing we can do more?”

Hartnett met Meg’s gaze. “I’m afraid not. Leave the rest to the police.”

Meg closed her eyes.

“Is there now nothing we can do more?” she repeated to herself.

“There is!” Seron cried.

Seron’s voice echoed through the basement. All eyes were on him.

“There’s still a way!”

It was a rare sight indeed—emotion was showing on Seron’s face. His eyes were narrowed and there was a smile on his lips.

“We can still do something, Megmica!”

“Y-yes! That’s me! I am Megmica!” Meg raised her hand, her eyes wide.

“You said before that your father has a contact at the embassy, right?”

“Yes! He is a very high-up man. I heard that he is a Royal Army colonel. I met him some times at parties where people from Sou Be-Il gather.”

“I read in a book that there’s a deep sense of camaraderie between people from Sou Be-Il who are living in Roxche. Especially in the Capital District.”

“Y-yes, there is. We people from Sou Be-Il are all very friendly together. Most in the Capital District.”

“Then ask your father to contact the colonel immediately. Tell him to say, ‘we found someone from Sou Be-Il here who needs our help. A foolish Roxchean man mistook him for his long-lost brother and dragged him all the way to Roxche’. Tell him to send your driver to pick up the man and take him to the embassy straightaway. We’ll come along too, if necessary—we’re the ones who found him, after all.”

“...Yes! I understand! I now know it very well, Seron!”

Seron’s grey eyes narrowed as Meg beamed radiantly.

“Good thinking, Seron! Haha! This is great!” Larry said between fits of laughter. Seron nodded.

“If this man had committed a crime and was hiding in here to escape, I would have handed him over to the police. But he hasn’t done anything wrong.”

“S’right. We gotta take this poor, innocent Westerner straight to the embassy for protection. The building’s legally Sou Be-Il territory, right? Once he steps inside, it’s finished,” Natalia added.

“Aw, I wanted to cover all the juicy details...but I guess I’ll let this story go,” Jenny said with a smile.

“I knew from the very beginning that this man and Mr. Murdoch were total strangers. See? There’s no resemblance to be seen. How cruel of you, everyone, to play along with this joke for so long,” Nick finished in half-monotone.

“Yeah...you’re right, Nick. They really don’t look a thing alike. If you’ll excuse us, Mr. Hartnett.”

Hartnett finally snapped out of his daze.

“H-hold it! You think anyone’s going to buy that?”

“We’ll make sure everyone does.”

“You want me to act like none of this ever happened? I told you, I’m here to help protect Burt Murdoch.”

“I’ve been wondering for a while now, Mr. Hartnett. Who are you?” Seron asked, deadpan. Natalia snorted, holding back her laughter. Meg smiled.

Hartnett put his hand on his side and responded gravely.

“Enough playing games, Seron. I’m from the Confederation Police, and I can’t just let this slide—as a police officer and as a responsible adult.”

“I don’t see any police officers around here.”

“I’m right here,” Hartnett said, putting a hand on his own chest. But Seron shook his head.

“Please, Mr. Hartnett. You’re from a construction company, here to make repairs to the storehouse. The school chairman and the Ministry of Education would never allow the Confederation Police to conduct an undercover operation on campus without permission. It’s just not possible.”

“Grk! You’re going to tell them...?” Hartnett said through gritted teeth.

Seron replied,

“I can’t tell anyone about something that never happened, Mr. Hartnett.”



## **Chapter 13: The Newspaper Club**

### **The 9th day of the seventh month. The third day of the practice camp.**

“Good morning, everyone,” Arthur said as he entered the dormitory cafeteria. “Let’s eat. We’ll dig in and put in some hard work at practice today.”

Larry, whose right cheek was slightly swollen from Mr. Murdoch’s punch, and Seron, mumbled in unison.

“I’m tired.” “I’m tired.”

“Both of you did splendid work yesterday,” Nick said from behind them.

The previous evening.

Seron and Larry returned to the dorms past midnight.

After the discovery, Meg had glanced at the fuming Hartnett as she gave her father a phone call.

The limousine had arrived at once. The man was calm by then, so Meg guided him inside. The driver did not question her, as he had been notified by Meg’s father. Seron and Larry boarded as well. With Natalia, Nick, and Jenny behind them, the limousine left the campus.

The man was completely silent. His eyes widened when he heard that they were headed for the Sou Be-Il embassy, but afterwards he closed them.

A rotund, middle-aged colonel in a brown Royal Army uniform greeted them at the embassy. There was a good-natured look on his face.

Once Meg had explained the situation in Bezelese, ‘the unfortunate Westerner who was mistaken for Burt Murdoch’ was taken to the infirmary under the care of an embassy employee.

That was the last Seron and Larry had seen of Meg. They were taken to separate rooms afterwards and showered with questions.

The questioner interrogated every last detail about the day’s events out of Seron. Just when he thought it was over, the questioner started all over again from the first question. This was to make sure that he was not lying. In the end, Seron and Larry ended up giving the same answers four times each.

They were provided dinner by the embassy and questioned until midnight before they were finally allowed to leave.

Just before they stepped into the taxi that the embassy called for them, the colonel personally came up to say that Meg had gone back home with her father. Then,

“We’re sending the man straight back to his homeland. It’s all thanks to you kids. We’re very grateful,” the colonel smiled, saluting.

Larry stood up straight and saluted back on reflex. And as for Seron,

“Thank you.”

He put a hand over his chest and bowed deeply.

After breakfast, Seron and Larry went to the gymnasium with the drama club.

“Sorry, everyone! My mother’s all right now—one of my relatives came to look after her. Now, let’s get back to practice and make up for all that lost time!”

Ms. Krantz injected energy into the club as practice began. The orchestra and the chorus club also joined in.

Meg stepped into the gymnasium behind her three upperclassmen. When she spotted Seron and Larry, she gave them a wink.

And she put on a beautiful smile.

Silently, expressionlessly, Seron trembled.

Larry grinned and gave Seron a hearty slap on the back.

Then came the orchestra and their instruments, led by Portman.

“See you after practice,” Natalia said with a smile.

“I’ll do my very best as well. Although it’s unfortunate that Seron can’t join me on stage,” Nick said, going up to the drama club.

In the midst of all the movement, Ms. Krantz seemed to say,

“By the way, Mr. Murdoch is on sick leave. Mr. Jobs from the social studies department will take over for him at the faculty office.”

But none of the students seemed to care.

Nick’s incredible performance, the orchestra’s powerful music, and the chorus club’s beautiful songs.

Seron and Larry lost themselves in the splendid combination as they went about doing their work. And in the blink of an eye, it was lunchtime.

“You guys can go ahead,” Arthur said to the helpers, “I’ll see you at afternoon practice.”

Seron and Larry left for the cafeteria before the drama club.

They were drinking tea in a corner of the cafeteria when Nick approached with an empty cup in hand. “Pardon me. Did you wait long?”

In the distance they saw the drama club lining up to get their lunches.

“Look. I’m sure you already know this, but Seron’s not waiting here for you,” Larry said.

“It’s all right. Tea, Nick?” Seron offered.

“Please.”

Now it was Seron, Larry, and Nick drinking tea in silence.

“Hey! Not eating yet?”

“Hello, everyone.”

Natalia and Meg arrived.

“We were waiting for you guys, Lia. Got something to discuss.”

“Great. Let’s take lunch someplace else.”

“Huh?” “Hm?” “What do you mean?”

The boys asked in unison.

“Shaddap and follow me. We’re going someplace we can chat in peace.”

They did as Natalia said and had their lunches packed up in brown paper bags.

Students had a choice between grilled chicken sandwiches or clam chowder with a side of salad and bread.

Three students chose the sandwich, and Larry got one of each as usual. As for Natalia, she got two of each.



“...Don’t tell me you’re going to double that tomorrow, Lia.”

“Shaddap and get walking. We’ll get tea when we get there.”

And as for the rest of the students in the cafeteria,

“I...kinda want to join in over there.”

“Give it a shot.”

“No way. The one with the glasses scares me.”

“Since when were they so friendly with one another?”

“I know, right? They don’t even have much in common. Look at all the cute guys there.”

“Wait, you’re including the blond one too?”

“Hm? He’s not bad, right?”

The drama club girls whispered as the five students left.

Sophia, the freckled vice-president of the drama club, watched uneasily.

The five students left the building and crossed the grassy grounds. It was clear overhead.

“How much longer do we have to go, Lia?”

“Man up and follow orders, blondie.”

Natalia continued to lead them in a march.

Seron walked just 2 meters behind Meg, just as silent as she was.

Eventually, the group arrived—

“I knew it.”

“You did, Seron?”

“This is the only place other than the cafeteria and the faculty office where you can get tea.”

“Right.”

—At the door to the newspaper club.

“Please excuse us,” Meg said and knocked on the door.

“Yeah, yeah,” Jenny replied from beyond, and the door opened. “Hey there! Come on in, everyone. You have my permission to enter.”

“Here you are, Jenny! A little something from big sis Natalia,” Natalia said, handing over a paper bag containing two sandwiches.

“Thanks.” Jenny took the paper bag and spun on her heels. “Here it is. The lunch you’ve been waiting for!”

“I appreciate it. So this is the 4th’s famous cafeteria food,” someone replied. The boys stepped inside and spotted the owner of the voice.

Sitting in the sofa was Hartnett, holding a mug. His hair was slicked back and he looked as intimidating as ever, but his attitude was more upbeat.

“Oh? I’m not sure we’ve met before, sir,” Nick joked.

“This is what I usually look like.” Hartnett laughed. He was in a button-up shirt with a tie. His navy suit jacket hung from a clothes hanger on the side.

“Sit wherever you feel like. I’ll brew the tea. Just to warn you, it’s gonna be really good. And don’t complain about all the cups being mismatched—I’ll give the ugliest one to Larry.”

“That’s fine. Just don’t mix developing solution into the tea.”

“Now that’s a great idea.”

“Jenny.”

“Don’t worry. I make it a personal policy to never waste a drop of developing solution.”

“Uh huh.”

There was only room for six on the sofas. Hartnett got up and sat in a nearby chair, unwrapping out his sandwich on the desk and quickly digging in. “This is great! I can’t believe you get to eat this well every day.”

Hartnett finished off an entire sandwich before Jenny had brewed tea.

Jenny placed the teacups in front of everyone and took a seat herself.

Three boys sat on one side, and three girls on the other. Seron and Meg were in the middle of their respective sofas. Nick was across from Jenny.

The teacups were all different in size and shape. Larry’s was compact and decorated with twee pink flowers.

“Seriously?”

“You know,” Nick chimed in. “That happens to be a Rous-Reçel teacup.”

“Is that supposed to be a place name?”

“Yes. Supposedly each and every white porcelain cup they produce costs about as much as a car.”

“Whoa!” Larry quickly withdrew his hand from the cup. Jenny waved him off.

“Don’t worry about it. I just brought in stuff no one was using at home. The rest of the set is broken anyway.”

“I...I see.”

“Thanks for waiting, everyone. Let’s eat,” Jenny said, taking the first bite.

The rest prayed before their meals or waited for the others before starting on their lunches.

“There’s a few things I need to tell you,” said Hartnett, turning his chair around, “You can keep eating.”

“This is great.”

Jenny was savoring her sandwich. She nibbled at it from the corner like a small animal.

“The Confederation Police received word from the Sou Be-Il embassy early this morning.”

Seron’s hands stopped.

“You can keep eating, Seron. I’m just giving you a report.”

“Right, sir.”

Seron bit into his sandwich. A bit of sauce got onto his mouth, so he wiped it away with his thumb and licked it.

“According to the embassy, the Westerner you brought in yesterday was officially confirmed not to be Burt Murdoch, the former Roxchean soldier and brother to Mark Murdoch. I don’t know how they did it, but that’s what happened.”

Meg beamed as she nibbled away on her own sandwich.

“You like the sandwich?” asked Natalia.

“Yes, I love the sandwich!” Meg replied.

Hartnett continued, "There's nothing the police can do at this point about the embassy's stance. Mark Murdoch is still being questioned about his idiotic misunderstanding. He was adamant that the man was indeed his brother, but things are pretty much set in stone at this point."

"Poor guy." Larry bit into his sandwich with a slight smile. His swollen face was still visible.

"And as for me, the bigwigs were happy with how I solved the case so quickly."

"That's wonderful," Nick said between bites. There was a resigned look in Hartnett's eyes.

"I suppose. That's all for the report."

Meg looked up at Seron opposite her and placed her half-eaten sandwich on its paper bag.

"Seron, and Larry...were you both afterwards all right?"

Seron had finished his sandwich. He replied gently, "Yeah. The questioning just went on a little too long, that's all. The colonel saw us off personally and hired a taxi for us and everything."

"Definitely. It was fun, getting to check out the Sou Be-Il embassy. Don't worry, Megmica," Larry added.

"Is that so? I am happy. My father became angry to me. He said that I must not do dangerous things. But this morning the colonel telephoned my home..."

Meg began choking up. Tears welled in her eyes.

"You okay? You don't have to force yourself," said Natalia. But Meg wiped away the tears and continued.

"No, I am not forcing myself. I am all right. I am all right. The colonel spoke to me, that the man gave his message to us."

"What was the message?" asked Seron.

"Erm... This was the message. 'There are still good people in Roxche, so I am happy. Thank you'."

"... 'Still', huh..." Seron trailed off, closing his eyes.

A moment's thought later, he spoke again.

"I'd like to visit Sou Be-Il someday. And I hope I'll be able to meet him there."

"Yes!" Meg chirped. "Then I will too come as interpreter!"

Seron's eyes flew open.

"Huh? ...Er, yeah. ...Thank you. I...I have faith in you," Seron stammered.

"Please trust in me! We will have fun!" Meg smiled.

Jenny nibbled on her sandwich and said under her breath,

"Talk about dense."

No one could hear her.

Everyone was finished eating, and they were on their second cups of tea.

"Anyway, there's another reason I came to see you today," said Hartnett.

"I don't believe you'll need to make us swear to silence. We have no real evidence, so no one would believe us even if we posted articles about the incident all over the school," Nick said. Jenny shot him a glare.

“You making fun of me, princess? Or is that supposed to be a challenge?”

“Please, call me Nick.”

“I know your name, okay? I just didn’t say it because I’m good at keeping secrets.”

“That’s interesting.”

Hartnett finally cut in. “Look, I’m not casting suspicion on any of you, including the newspaper girl.”

“It’s Jenny.”

“Jenny, then. I’m here to talk about something else.”

“Like what?” said Natalia. “‘A discussion with a police officer’ doesn’t have a nice ring to it.”

“I know this might sound foolish, but…” Hartnett began. All eyes but Jenny’s were on him.

Hartnett took a breath and said as casually as though asking someone to get him coffee—

“If anything happens, I want your cooperation.”

“What?” “Pardon?” “Huh?” “Really?” “Oh.”

Seron, Nick, Larry, Natalia, and Meg looked at him quizzically.

“What do you mean by that, Mr. Hartnett?”

“It’s just like you said the other day, Seron. A school campus—”

“A school campus is a difficult place for the police to investigate.”

“Exactly. Especially a secondary school campus, and especially places like the 4th Capital Secondary School, where a good chunk of the student body is from wealthy backgrounds.”

Everyone was in silent agreement.

“Of course we can step in if someone files a report or if there’s clearly a case to be investigated, but we have our limits. If all we have are small hints or the case is concealed from us, like with the Murdoch case, the police will have a very difficult time.”

Seron was surprised. “So you’re asking us for help? That’s—”

“That’s not very responsible of you,” Natalia finished.

Hartnett conceded the point. “Yeah. I think so too.”

“Oh?” Natalia tilted her head.

“But remember this. When we—this insignificant group called the police—take action, it’s to help someone in need. Someone who’s suffering or in despair. But if no one brings those people to our attention, they’ll be left to agonize alone like Burt Murdoch was,” Hartnett said, his tone becoming grave. “If you don’t care that things like that might happen in your school, that’s fine with me. Just forget this conversation happened. Don’t spare a second thought for this poor bottom-rung civil servant who had to lie his way through the gates of learning with the claim that he came to apologize for the sudden cancellation of construction work!”

*‘Just join the drama club already,’* Larry thought, but he did not say a word.

There was a long moment of silence.

Until a soprano voice broke the silence.

“I will help you!”

Meg stood from her seat. All eyes were on her.

“Something like this...it must not happen again anymore! If someone is crying nearby, a human being must hold out their hands to the someone!”

Hartnett rose to his feet and burst into applause.

“Well said!”

Everyone stared at Hartnett.

“What’d he just say?” asked Larry.

Jenny, who understood Bezelese, answered.

“He’s praising her.”

Meg stared, wide-eyed. “My gosh...you spoke Bezelese, Mr. Hartnett?” she asked in Bezelese.

“Very, very little. I studied Bezelese at uni-university. A police officer must do work in the wide world.”

“That’s incredible! I’m happy to cooperate. Please contact me if anything should happen. I will do my very best to assist you—it’s the duty of any upstanding citizen, no matter which side of the continent you happen to be on.”

“That is wonderful! You are a model citizen. Yes!”

“Not at all. I’m simply doing my civic duty.”

Larry began to elbow Seron.

“Hey...those two are getting pretty fired up. You just gonna sit back?”

Nick also joined in on the ribbing.

“I think this might be an interesting venture, Seron.”

*Thud.*

Seron rose to his feet, slamming his hands on the table.

“Huh?” “Hm?”

The two who were already standing turned.

Seron took a deep breath—

“All right,” he said in Roxchean. “We’ll help out if anything comes up. There are still good people in Roxche!”

“Good to hear, Seron!”

“Yes! Seron is a very good person. I love people like that.”

Seron almost lost his balance in the flood of joy, but he managed to steady himself. And he said nothing.

“Man...” Larry sighed at the show of inaction.

“So it’s decided. What about the rest of you?” asked Jenny.

“As long as it doesn’t get in the way of school. And all the better if it gives me an excuse to cut orchestra practice,” said Natalia.

“If Seron’s in, so am I,” Larry chimed in.

“Then I will join you as well,” Nick finished.

“You don’t have to force yourself, Nick.”

“You wound me, Larry. I considered you a friend.”

Jenny clapped her hands together. “Then it’s decided. All five of you are joining the newspaper club! Congrats!”

Seron and Natalia frowned, and Larry voiced his disbelief.

“What?”

“What’re you so surprised about? I was talking to Mr. Hartnett here before you showed up, and we decided we needed a place to compile and distribute information.”

“And that place is the newspaper club?” Larry asked.

“I also believe this is a suitable place.” Nick nodded. “The clubroom offers us a place to gather, is isolated from prying eyes, is furnished with a telephone, and has a darkroom where we can develop incriminating photographs.”

“I guess...” Larry agreed.

“So I’ll accept you all as club members and give you keys to the room! I don’t mind if you’re pulling double duty with another club. And now it’s all sorted out. The newspaper club can finally go official!” Jenny cheered, her eyes sparkling.

“So you admit it wasn’t before, then,” Natalia chuckled.

“Yeah, yeah. Anyway, you can make all the noise you want in here, so feel free to bring in a few instruments to play, Nat.”

“Sweet. I’ll haul in my guitar. I’m gonna be vice-president.”

“Got it. Now we just need a treasurer. Anyone willing to volunteer?” Jenny asked, scanning the room.

“You do it, Seron. I’m not interested.”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to decline as well.”

Seron, still silent, met Meg’s gaze. She was watching him expectantly, her eyes brimming with emotion.

He was conquered in an instant. “A-all right.”

“Then it’s decided. The newspaper club has been born anew today!” Jenny declared.

“From this day forward, we will investigate every last inch of this school to gather and report new information! The truth is in our hands!”

Nick applauded with a smile. Jenny bashfully stopped him.

“It’s nice to enjoy your youth, but don’t forget about the cooperation deal,” Hartnett said from the back.

“Of course. The boys and girls here are all good citizens, after all.”

“No adults allowed, eh? I suppose I don’t really mind...” Hartnett pushed his chair back into place and pulled off his jacket from the hanger. “Now that you’ve agreed to help, my job here is done. I’m going back to work. Thanks for the sandwich, and keep in touch. I don’t know if I’ll see you during the break or after, but take care of yourselves.”

Hartnett walked out with a wave.

When the door closed, Seron fell back into the sofa.

Meg also took a seat. Their eyes met.

“We must use our best efforts!”

“Huh?”

“We must use our best efforts and help people! All of us together!”

“...Oh. Yeah. You’re right.”

“Let us pile our hands!”

Meg held out her slender, pale arm over the table.

“Now! Put your hands on my hand. We will have a ceremony to the new newspaper club. We must say, ‘hip hip huzzah’!”

Larry grabbed Seron’s hand—

“You first.”

—And placed it on top of Meg’s.

The moment his palm touched the back of her hand, Seron’s face twitched. But no one noticed.

“I’m next. Don’t want any boys piling together again,” Natalia said, joining in.

“Am I next?” Larry’s muscled arm reached in.

“My turn.” Jenny’s tiny hand followed.

“I suppose I’ll top us off.” Nick finished elegantly.

Once all six hands were together, Meg smiled.

“Heh heh...this is slightly too heavy for my hand. I feel your weights. Then let us begin the cheers. For the newspaper club! Hip hip huzzah!”

Their hands rose and fell, then scattered.

Seron clenched his right hand into a fist.

“By the way,” Jenny said suddenly, “Lunchtime’s almost over. You sure you have time to be standing around here?”

In disbelief, the others turned to the wall clock.

“Shoot, Ms. Krantz is gonna have our heads! Let’s get going, Seron.”

“Not good.”

“I believe I must return to the gymnasium as well.”

“Run, Meg.”

“Oh—yes! Please do not leave me back...”

The new members of the newspaper club rushed outside, waving at Jenny on the way.

“Bye guys. See you later.”

Jenny sat on the sofa with a teacup in hand and stared at the door that had again slammed shut.

“Looks like I’ll be busy for quite a while.”

She downed her tea in one go.





## **Seron's Dream**

My name is Seron.

My full name is Seron Maxwell. I am 15 years old, and a third-year student in secondary school. I was born on the 3rd day of the third month of the year 3290 of the World Calendar.

I was born in the Roxcheanuk Confederation, which takes up the eastern half of the only continent in the world. By that point, the war between Roxche and the Allied Kingdoms of Bezel-Iltoa in the western half of the continent had already ended. The world was finally at peace.

I don't remember much of my childhood, but for a while I was the pampered son of a rich family. That is, until my father cheated on my mother. She divorced him then and took me and my baby sister Leena back to her hometown.

After that, my family name became 'Maxwell'. Mother used the alimony from the divorce to start a frozen food business and rose to success in the blink of an eye.

Our surroundings changed rapidly too. At first we lived in a small apartment building in town. Then an average one. Then, an expensive one. Then a rented house. And finally, we moved into a luxury mansion in a posh neighborhood.

Leena and I were babysat by neighbors at first, followed by a nanny, followed by maids and a butler. The fast-changing environment was both fascinating and fun.

But I was a bit of a loner in primary school. Most of my classmates were from ordinary middle-class families; Leena and I were the only ones who had a bodyguard to drive us to and from the school. I was not an outcast, but most people kept me at arm's length.

Thanks to that, I had a lot of time on my hands to focus on my studies. I chose to attend secondary school because I decided I wanted to go to university someday. In Roxche, you can't attend university without having finished secondary school. Most of my classmates elected to go to vocational school instead.

That was when Mother made a suggestion.

*"Honey, would you like to attend secondary school in the Capital District?"*

She said that there would be more upper-class kids in the Capital District, which would make life easier for me. I would receive a better education and more easily make friends from similar backgrounds, she said.

I agreed. So when I was 12, I began to attend school in the Capital District—the most famous secondary school in the area, the 4th Capital Secondary School.

The Capital District was hundreds of kilometers away from home. It was the kind of distance you had to cover on a sleeper train. As commuting was impossible, I automatically signed up to live in the dormitories.

I was dreaming.

Before I knew it, 12-year-old me was standing at the entrance to the dorms.

I was alone, wearing my uniform and holding my bag.

The senior-classmen were welcoming the new arrivals. The matrons were greeting us. It was welcoming day at the dorms.

When I turned, I saw my friend Larry.

*"Hey Seron!"*

Twelve-year-old Larry. A boy with blond hair and blue eyes in a slightly baggy uniform.

If memory serves, I hadn't met Larry yet.

Larry Hepburn was a nice and outgoing boy from a long line of soldiers and knights. We first met when he sat down next to me in the first class of the term.

I was wearing a jacket—not from my uniform—and standing next to Mother, who was in an impeccable blue suit.

That's right. This is a dream.

Fifteen-year-old me is having a dream.

That's why my memories are all jumbled together.

Then it makes sense.

I greeted my friend, three years younger than he really was and wearing a school tracksuit embroidered with the name 'Hepburn'. The friend who was not actually there at the time.

*"We meet again. Let's chat more later."*

"Sure thing! Let's meet later!"

Larry disappeared with a wave—

Before I knew it, I was in a classroom.

Larry was sitting next to me in summer uniform. Mr. Murdoch was teaching Roxchean at the front of the room.

Secondary school was the perfect place to study.

It was filled with people who dreamed of going to university to join Roxche's elite. It had study rooms and an excellent library. The campus was isolated just enough from the city. I had no complaints. And above all, the students were passionate about their studies.

Because many of the students here were children of wealthy families or celebrities, no one was really surprised to hear that Mother was the president of Maxwell Frozen Foods. People were generally more shocked about how far I had come to study here.

But I had a problem.

"Hey Seron. We're having a party at my place. Wanna come?"

"Seron...would you like to have lunch with me?"

"Do you like anyone, Seron?"

It started on the very first day of class. The girls wouldn't stop trying to talk to me.

I wasn't particularly interested in anyone, but I didn't understand why they would ask me something like that.

When I confided in Larry, he looked incredulous.

"You mean you didn't know, buddy?"

*Know what?*

"No way! Man, that's totally like you. So you didn't realize after all!"

*Wh-what are you talking about?*

"That you're a really handsome guy!"

*I guess that's how it was.*

I had never considered it, but apparently I was handsome and popular with the girls.

“You might as well try a more elegant style now that you’re going to the Capital District,” Mother had said. I had worn my hair very short in primary school, but at her suggestion I began to grow it out. Maybe that was why I became ‘the very handsome Seron Maxwell’.

Sometimes, it was a classmate.

Sometimes, it was a girl I met on the grounds.

Sometimes, a girl I met in the cafeteria.

Sometimes, someone my own age. Sometimes, a senior-classman. And sometimes (starting in second year), a junior-classman.

*“Will you go out with me?”*

I don’t remember how many times I’ve heard those words now.

And each time, I had to offer my deepest apologies.

“Argh...”

“Another apology, Seron? Must be tough.”

“Yeah... Larry, what does it mean to go out with someone, anyway?”

“Well...er... When two people with feelings for each other spend time alone together.”

“What kind of feelings?”

“...Erm... It’s like...when you feel happier about being with someone more than anyone else in the world? I bet that’s what it feels like.”

“I see. I’ve never had those feelings yet.”

“...Anyway, just make sure you don’t break anyone’s heart when you turn them down.”

“You sure know a lot, Larry.”

“I saw this stuff in a magazine.”

“...All right. I’ll make sure to properly apologize when I turn them down.”

I don’t know how many more I had to turn down afterwards.

After talking to Larry some more, I found out that dating someone generally began with ‘love at first sight’.

“I met you for the first time right now, and I did not fall in love with you.”

I avoided saying that, though.

“Good to hear, Seron. If you’d said that, someone might have stabbed you. I’m sure you’ll find a nice girl one of these days.”

Even in my dreams Larry is a dependable friend. Right now he is in a sweat-drenched T-shirt.

My life in secondary school went on—

I was in my third year.

And I met her.

‘So this is love at first sight. I finally understand.’

But I didn’t have the time to slowly digest this thought.

It was the year 3305 of the World Calendar, the first day of the new term. I chose to take a visual arts class for my fine arts option, and the class began a little ways into the year.

The moment I spotted her—taking a seat in the left-hand corner of the art room—my world was turned upside-down.

She had her long black hair tied up in pigtails. She had fair skin and dark eyes. She seemed to shine like a ray of light in the dull classroom.

She was cute. Cool. Beautiful.

Could there be anyone in the world more wonderful than her?

I felt like I was dreaming.

Which is true, in a sense.

“That’s right, Seron! That’s what ‘love at first sight’ means!”

Larry was wearing a red turtleneck sweater with the word ‘ARMY’ on it. He had taken music class instead of visual art, so he was not actually there.

“Wh-what do I do?” I asked.

“C’mon, use your head. Go talk to her.”

“R-r-right. Right.”

“You wanna know more about her, yeah?”

“Y-yeah.”

“Then go talk to her, Seron Maxwell. Just like all those girls talked to you over the past two years. That’s how it all starts. Get up and make small talk.”

The teacher came in. So I ignored Larry, who was not actually there, and began to listen. I could not speak to her while class was going on.

“Who cares? Just forget the teacher!”

I can’t do that.

“Even in your dreams, you’re an honor student.”

The teacher gave us a quick outline of the term, then told us to partner up with a classmate and draw their face.

“Sweet! This is your chance, buddy. She’s sitting right next to you; just talk to her. It looks like she’s not the type to start up a conversation herself, so you should help her out. And come to think of it, you were pretty good at drawing too.”

“Y-yeah...”

I swallowed. My heart was pounding furiously in my chest. I took a deep breath to calm myself down—

“Megmica here moved to Roxche from Sou Be-Il. Would anyone like to volunteer to be her partner?” the teacher said out of the blue.

The pigtailed girl trembled slightly.

I was half a second late to speak up.

“\_\_\_\_\_.”

I heard moontongue.

I knew it was not really an extraterrestrial language, but the words sounded like gibberish to me. They were spoken by a girl.

The pigtailed girl’s eyes widened as she looked up at the girl who had stood ahead to her right. She had long brown hair and looked fiercely confident and lively. In a word, ‘strong’.

“What’re you doing, Seron? It’s not too late!”

Larry—dressed in his uniform—spurred me forward as I drew the face of the male classmate I’d ended up partnering with.

The pigtailed girl and the confident girl chattered endlessly as they sat face-to-face.  
I could hear their voices, but didn't understand a word.  
But even I could tell that they were having fun.  
I hated myself.  
I hated myself for being unable to understand her, even though she was right next to me.  
For being unable to speak to her, even though she was right next to me.  
I still hated myself when class ended.  
My partner looked at the picture I'd drawn.  
"You're pretty good at this. Are you gonna be a professional illustrator?" he asked, but I  
had no intention of becoming one.  
Then he added,  
"I'm not as good as you, but I did my best."  
He showed me my face.  
The picture showed a boy who looked like he was about to cry.

I didn't learn much about her by the time visual arts class ended in the summer. Her name  
was Strauski Megmica, and she was from Sou Be-Il. That was it.

She spent most of the class talking with the confident brunette. It looked like they were  
having fun together. And no one tried to get in their way.

I started chatting with the guy I was paired up with in the first class, and a few girls  
joined us afterwards.

The rest of the term went by quickly, and I turned down yet more admirers.  
"Man, I wish I could help," Larry grumbled all the while, before finally vanishing like  
mist.

Larry was gone, and the classroom was gone. Third-year me was standing all alone in the  
dark.

No one was there to get in my way.

If Megmica were to appear before me, I could talk to her. Ask her out.

"No, you couldn't."

I turned. There stood a boy whom all the girls fawned over.

The boy—

Seron Maxwell—

I—

Remained completely expressionless.

"You're hopeless. Just give up on her. It's not going to happen."

This is a nightmare.

I don't like this at all.

I want to open my eyes.

"You're hopeless. Hopeless—"

No, I—

\* \* \*

When I opened my eyes, I was in a room.

I sat in a sofa, staring at the sofa across the coffee table and at the shelf behind it. The light from the window illuminated the room.

I was still drowsy. Where was I? What time was it?

“Are you all right, Seron? It seemed like you were dreaming a nightmare.”

I heard a voice from my left.

I slowly turned my head.

“!”

Megmica was giving me a worried look. Was she trying to look into my face? Our faces were so close.

Her large, dark eyes stared into mine.

“I’m okay,” I replied quickly. It looks like I’m still dreaming. “Yeah. I’m fine.”

“Are you sure that you are fine? Please do not work too hard.”

At the sound of Megmica’s lovely voice, I remembered where I was and what I was doing.

My name is Seron.

My full name is Seron Maxwell. I am 15 years old, and a third-year secondary school student.

## **Larry and Seron**

Once upon a time—specifically, the first month of the year 3303 of the World Calendar—  
In a certain land—specifically, the Special Capital District in the Roxcheanuk  
Confederation—lived a certain boy.

The boy's name was Larry Hepburn.

Larry was 12 years old. He had graduated from primary school at the end of the previous year, and was now in secondary school.

He was a little smaller than other kids his age—in other words, he was puny—but he was solid as a rock thanks to his daily workout regimen. He had blond hair cropped short and eyes the color of the sky. Dressed in his new uniform, Larry walked down the street by the campus with his new leather bag in hand to attend the 4th Capital Secondary School.

“All right! From today on, I'm a secondary school student!” he said energetically.

Today was the second day of school. And it was technically the first day of class, as the previous day was an entrance ceremony and orientation day where parents accompanied the new first-years. Today was the first day of school for the senior-classmen.

Larry stepped into the roundabout in front of the gates.

“I can do this!”

He headed for the gates with a spring in his step.

“Argh!”

And there he was mercilessly trampled by countless taller students. Larry did not know that the narrow school gates were about as crowded as the metro during rush hour. And now he knew.

Larry was swept into campus in the torrent of people.

The Hepburns were a famous military family in the Capital District.

Before the founding of Roxche, they had served a kingdom for generations as knights. And after the age of kings, they served as renowned soldiers in the military.

Larry's father was in the Confederation Army, and Larry hoped to follow in his footsteps.

To do that, he had to attend the Confederation Army Officers' Academy. And to do *that*, he had to graduate from secondary school.

Students between the ages of 12 and 18 attended secondary school in order to receive higher education. In Roxche, only secondary school graduates could attend university.

In one sense, a child's life was decided when he or she was 12 years old. Those who did not pass the secondary school entrance exam usually attended a four-year vocational school instead before joining the workforce.

Larry Hepburn had always been physically fit and sound of spirit, but he had no talent for academics.

His brother, six years his senior, had entered secondary school without a hitch. He graduated just as Larry started and was now starting at the Confederation Army Officer's Academy, but Larry had only narrowly made it into school.

*“Don't worry, son. Secondary school isn't everything; nor is the military. You can walk your own path.”*

*“Your father’s right, sweetheart. If you push yourself too hard, you’ll ruin yourself while you’re still young.”*

His parents were kind and understanding. But being so competitive, Larry could not let himself fail after hearing their encouragement.

Without realizing that he had fallen right into his parents’ skillful trap, Larry had applied himself to his studies.

*“If you give up now, you give up all hope for your future!”* the tutor had drilled him, and Larry very narrowly managed to get the grades to continue to secondary school.

Secondary schools were famous—or infamous, according to some—for the freedom they offered. Students were not assigned to one classroom. They had to leave their things in lockers and move between classrooms each period.

Students had a choice of subjects they could take, save for some required courses. Each subject was assigned a level, and students started at the lowest.

For example, Roxchean was a required subject, and incoming students had to take the class called ‘Roxchean 101’. There were several Roxchean 101 classes in the term, so students could pick one that did not overlap with any other classes they wanted to take.

Generally, students would move on to Roxchean 201 in second year. The content of the class also changed depending on the third digit of the course code, so for Roxchean there could be more specialized classes like ‘Roxchean Grammar’ and ‘Essay-Writing’.

Each course had a basic class, like Mathematics 101 or Social Studies 101, and the numbers went all the way up to 601 for the sixth-years. Particularly bright students could take courses early—for example, a third-year could theoretically take a 401 or a 501 class.

Most students took three classes in the morning and one or two in the afternoon. They also had the option to take two in the morning or three in the afternoon. Students had the freedom to control their schedules according to their own abilities.

At the orientation the previous day, Larry had made himself an ordinary timetable like the other first-years. It was one of the default choices the school offered to newcomers, who did not yet fully understand the system.

*“So first up is history...”*

The first secondary school course Larry would ever take was Social Studies 105, also known as the Roxchean History. It provided a simple general overview of the history of Roxche, from prehistory to yesterday.

There were many buildings on the school campus, which made it difficult for most first-years to remember the school layout and find their way in the short travel time they were allotted.

*“Here.”*

But Larry had been exploring forests with nothing but a map and a compass since he was a child. He had an excellent sense of direction and had a good head for geography.

Larry remembered the campus map he had seen the other day and made it to the classroom before anyone else.

There were many different kinds of classrooms in the school. This one had no raised podiums or steps, and had rows and rows of individual desks and chairs. He might as well sit at the very front, Larry thought, and chose the first seat in the center of the room.



He waited as he fixed his uniform and his crooked tie, and eventually the other students filtered in. One of the boys even asked Larry if he was in the right classroom. Some students really had come to the wrong one. They were all only carrying pens and notebooks because they didn't know what textbooks to buy yet.

Some of the students were chatting, but most were lost in a sea of strangers. The room was swirling with tense uncertainty and excitement for the secondary school life that was about to begin.

The bell rang, and wandering students leapt into their classrooms. There were about 30 in Larry's class, although the number differed slightly depending on the classes.

The teacher entered the classroom with several students who had lost their way. She was a woman in her 40s with a good-natured expression.

"Attention, please!"

But her voice was surprisingly loud. Everyone tensed.

The teacher congratulated the students on their acceptance and began to rattle off a list of things they needed to know about student life at the 4th Capital Secondary School.

She informed them that secondary school was not part of their mandatory education, so they should drop out if they did not wish to study.

That students with poor attendance and grades would be suspended or expelled without exception.

That students should consult a school counselor to take make-up classes or to drop classes and try again the next term if they were having difficulty. That it was not shameful to do so and many senior-classmen were doing the same.

That students had to choose their courses carefully, lest they flounder in later years trying to take certain courses they needed to graduate.

Larry was at a loss, unable to keep up with all the advice. That was when he heard someone taking notes.

The boy to his left was taking down everything the teacher was saying, word-for-word.

Larry didn't remember the boy sitting down beside him, but there he was. A boy in the same uniform and clearly in the same year.

He had black hair that was a little long, parted down the middle. His eyes were grey.

The boy had handsome features, but to Larry he just looked withdrawn, or even frail.

He was taller than Larry—no surprise there, as that was the case with most boys and even a few girls.

Talk about diligent, Larry thought, and looked ahead again without a second thought.

The teacher continued to rattle off advice and the boy next to Larry continued to scribble down notes.

Class was halfway done by the time the teacher was finished.

"Now let's start the introductions. It might be hard to make new friends in secondary school, since you'll have different classmates each period. But try to make at least one new friend in each class and introduce yourselves. I want you to stand up one at a time and tell the class your name and where you're from, and about your family and your hobbies if you'd like. Let's start with you, by the window."

The introductions began. Larry remembered what his brother had said.

*“There are a lot of kids at the 4th Capital Secondary School with famous parents. Listen for all the last names when they introduce themselves—you’ll get a kick out of it.”*

Sure enough, among the 30 students were the son of the most famous radio newscaster in the Capital District, the daughter of a gorgeous actress, and the son of the president of a large pharmaceutical company.

Larry knew what they’d think about him.

*‘Oh. Second son of the Hepburn family, huh.’*

And,

*‘Pretty short for a Hepburn.’*

But either way, he finished his introduction. The others did seem confused about his love of outdoor activities, camping, and bodybuilding, but he did not care.

It was time for the boy on Larry’s left to introduce himself. He stood from his seat.

“My name is Seron Maxwell. I live in the dormitories. My mother is the president of Maxwell Frozen Foods.”

Larry remembered the distinctive red frozen food packages, but did not think too much of it.

“My hobby is reading.”

Larry wondered if anyone could possibly read as a hobby.

The boy finished his plain introduction and took a seat, and Larry forgot about him for the next three days.

Over the course of the day, Larry heard the names of over a hundred celebrities and other high-profile individuals.

“How was class, honey? Make any new friends?” his mother asked that evening.

“I met too many people,” Larry was forced to say.

\* \* \*

It was the fourth day of his life as a secondary school student.

Larry now knew how to pass safely through the crowded gates in the morning. He was also largely adjusted to student life.

Some of his classmates now remembered him by name, and thanks to his outgoing personality he now had some friends to chat with.

Naturally, other students were trying to make new friends as well. By that point, Larry knew people he could have lunch together with.

Other than the fast-paced and difficult classes, school was a blast. Which was the most important thing as far as Larry was concerned.

After school, Larry crossed the vast grounds to the gate on his way home. The sun was setting in the west.

Normally, he took the bus back home. But it was such a nice day that he decided to make the hour-long journey on foot to get some exercise instead.

Because there were so many students at the school, the way to the gate was teeming. So Larry went off the path and strode down a narrow dirt road between the trees and the building. Not many people used this route because the trees concealed the path completely.

That was when he spotted something ahead in his way. Several boys were gathered in the middle of the path. Larry frowned.

He clicked his tongue and decided to turn back, when he noticed two things.

One was that the students ahead were surrounding one boy.

The other was that the lone, indifferent boy had sat next to him in history class—

“Who was that again...? Aha. The frozen food guy.”

That the student was the son of the president of a famous frozen food company.

The others around him all seemed to be first-years. And it definitely did not look like they were gathered for a friendly chat.

“Hm...”

Larry frowned and resumed his walk down the dirt path.

As he drew closer, he heard the contents of their conversation.

“Don’t you get it, you imbecile? We’re doing you a favor here, asking you to join us,” said one of the boys.

Another boy chimed in. “Secondary school’s all about making connections for the future. Connections are everything in business!”

That wasn’t entirely untrue.

“You should be grateful we’re giving you a chance to join us.”

But even someone as dense as Larry understood. The gang was trying to pull in the handsome frozen food heir into their group at any cost.

Frozen Food finally broke his silence.

“I’m not interested in friends who offer to let me ‘join’ them. And I’m here to study, not make connections. Look for someone else.”

He was cold as ice, Larry thought. The boys who heard him from up close must have thought the same—or worse.

One of the group of six was particularly quick to anger. He was the big one of the group. He went up to Frozen Food and shoved him hard.

Frozen Food staggered. His back hit the wall.

“Man...”

Larry was now right behind the group of delinquent boys. But none of them had noticed Larry, who was not involved in any way. And because Larry was so small, Frozen Food could not see him either.

“Are we done here? Excuse me,” Frozen Food said, turning away.

Understandably, the delinquent boys fumed.

“I’ll make sure no one invites you to any parties, Seron Maxwell!”

“You’re gonna regret treating us like idiots!”

Larry was finally reminded of Frozen Food’s name. Seron.

Seron did not even blink.

“Great. Now I won’t have to bother turning them down.”

Larry smacked his own forehead. Though Seron might not have meant to sound hostile, he had most definitely provoked the boys.

As expected, they were livid. They finally exploded.

“You’re not getting away with that one, punk! You’re dead!”

“You asked for it!”

Larry sighed.

*“Rich boys tend to stick together. They never get into fights,”* his brother had said. But that proved untrue in only five days.

What should he do, Larry wondered. It would take too long to call a teacher over, and it would be a hassle to go all the way into the building. But Larry could not stand back and watch as a lone boy was beaten up by six—even if he had a frigid attitude.

At the same time, something occurred to him.

If Seron did not even try to put up resistance, Larry had no reason to help him.

There was no need to help someone who simply asked for help without even trying to help themselves.

A long time ago, Larry had heard a story from his grandfather.

Once upon a time, Larry’s ancestor was the head of a band of knights. He was on a campaign to bring peace to the land when, in enemy territory, he came across two villages threatened by bandits.

One village had decided to do obey the bandits the next time they raided. The other village had decided to fight to the last man.

Both villages pleaded with Larry’s ancestor to help them. The ancestor only helped the second village before defeating the bandits.

*“There’s no reason to help someone who simply asks for help without making any effort.”* Larry had learned from his grandfather.

“Now...which one are you?” Larry wondered, standing on his toes to get a good look at Seron.

Seron’s response was clear.

“I know I can’t win against all six of you.”

“Then beg for—”

The boy was offering mercy, but Seron cut him off and hefted his bag off the ground.

“So I promise I’ll hit the first one to lunge at me with my bag. It’s full of library books, and I guarantee it’s going to hurt. Sorry in advance.”

Larry could practically hear the six freeze. He also noticed himself smiling.

Then, he loudly made himself known.

“That’s enough, Seron!”

The six boys turned, flinching.

Seron stared in bemusement with his bag still in his hands.

“Sorry to keep you waiting, buddy.” Larry said, “Who’re these guys?”

\* \* \*

“I didn’t ask for your help, but thank you. I appreciate it.”

Though Larry was small in stature, he looked like he could put up quite the fight. The six boys left the scene in surprise. Dozens of seconds passed before Seron finally spoke.

“You sat next to me in history class, didn’t you. You were...Larry Hepburn?”

Larry grinned. “Hey, you’ve got a pretty good memory. I was just passing by, and I thought you could use some help. And you’re welcome.”

“I see. I’ll repay the favor one day.”

“Don’t worry about it. I only walked in partway through so I don’t have the story, but people are gonna get angry if you’re always so blunt with them.”

“I guess so. But it was true,” Seron said firmly.

“And there’s your problem.” Larry chuckled. “You might want to fix that habit.”

“That might be a bit tough. But I’ll try. I can’t always hope someone will come to help me out.”

“That’s the spirit! Even someone as dumb as me knows that much.”

Seron gave him a quizzical stare.

“What are you talking about, Larry?”

“Oh. I mean I only just made it into the school. My grades were awful.”

“I see...”

Seron trailed off and fell into thought. Several seconds passed and Larry wondered what he should do, when—

“Then let me help you.”

“Huh? What do you mean?”

“I can help you study. Ask me anything anytime. I live in the dorms, so after class I’m almost always in the library studying or reading.”

“I-I see. But you don’t really need to help me. I have a really bad memory—”

“Which is all the more reason for me to help. I told you, I’ll repay the favor.”

“You’re a stubborn one, huh. All right. I accept your token of gratitude, Seron.”

“Thanks.”

“But in exchange—” Larry grinned.

“Hm?”

“I’m gonna help round out your personality. It’s not fair if you’re always paying me back, right?”

Seron was silent.

“C’mon, Seron! We’re friends now!” Larry laughed.

“Heh.” Seron chuckled as well.

Four days later, after class.

“Sorry, man. I’m gonna need some help with history. And I missed the notes for these sections here, so can I copy off you? Also, I need some help with Roxchean—”

Larry was half in tears as he clung desperately to Seron in the library.

\* \* \*

Time passed. It was two years later, in the year 3305.

“What are these heinous grades, Larry? You shooting for a world record?”

“Shaddap, Lia. I’m happy as long as I don’t get kicked out of school.”

“I can’t believe you lasted this long.”

“I know, right? I definitely made the right choice back then.”

“What’re you going on about?”

**-To be continued-**

# 黒聖紅白の あとがき。

またジョージ。  
自由に描いて  
いいって  
言われたから...

「メグとセロン」  
の、あとがきで  
あんなワケの  
分からない事  
書いたのに  
怒られ  
たから、  
調子に  
乗って  
「メグとセロン」では  
ご覧の通り  
表紙からして  
ジョージ!!

そう、前回素材が良い  
とか、言い残しておいたが、  
よするにこういう事なんです。  
← 表紙もですが、  
『ジョージのひまわり花』  
これが重要なんです。  
このひまわり花を  
かざる事により  
ジョージの限界性能  
が、僕が計算  
したよりも  
180%UPするん  
です。それで  
あのプレイ...  
僕キモい  
....。



スカートの下に  
ジョージとかも  
ポイント高いかも。

KUROK